
THE IDENTITY CHECK

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PROLOGUE

THE OLD WOMAN HOBBOLED off the bus and squinted at the setting sun. It blazed on the western horizon, its rays like rainbow daggers piercing the thick cataracts that covered her tired eyes. The storm had passed quickly, typical of desert downpours. The damp Vegas air smelled of wet asphalt and dustless desert plants, scrubbed clean by the sudden downfall. Cars, their hurried drivers hunched over behind the wheel, sped up and down Rancho Drive. Whirling tires splashed the oily residue from the street, spinning it into a misty cloud that hovered and clung to the newly washed air, then drifted and settled again on everything within its toxic reach.

The entire process would start all over again with the next spring storm. In a concrete-and-steel cycle of life, such periodic rain storms granted new soul to the wasteland town when they came thundering through. Precious life, unnoticed by passersby, clung inside a crack of the concrete curb where the old woman stood. The dry autumn seed had fought for sun and moisture, struggling up from its long winter hiding place, soon to feel the fate of the scorching summer heat. Like the old woman, the seedling would constantly seek refuge, then shrivel and die, its remnants blowing to some forgotten spot when it reached the final measure of its existence.

The wrinkled woman, too, wandered where the wind would blow. South when the wintry air bit at her corrugated arthritic hands, and still further south when the frigid arctic front once more plunged from the land up yonder. As the months passed, when the sultry, sluggish atmosphere choked at her tired lungs, she'd hop a train and venture northward to a more inviting town. Each city held favorite places to rest her tired bones, friends who made her vagrant existence bearable. Year after lonely year, from one more short span of time to the next, she drifted.

But this evening the old woman was on a mission. She leaned to-

ward the busy street, listening to the passing cars, measuring a safe gap to scurry across. Pursing her lips, she licked the bitter taste of the dirty mist from her toothless mouth and clutched tightly to a small stack of tattered envelopes she held in her crooked fingers. Then she launched over the curb, fording the west side of the street like a wise old cat. Pausing in the median, she hitched her cotton calf-length skirt back onto to her bony hips and tugged at the pinched boxer shorts that lay beneath.

Word had gone out on the street: *The deposit box was stationed on Rancho Drive, near the old Husky station scheduled for demolition and a new shopping center soon to come.* The sound of traffic died as the distant light choked the more sluggish, less fortunate travelers to a stop.

The old woman had been called Becky as a girl; nowadays, few knew her name. Her close friends were numbered like family and had busted their hides to collect the precious mail she anxiously sought to deliver. "Come on, Belle," she mumbled under her breath as she scooted from the center of the street and landed safely on the opposite curb.

Mail hadn't come easily. In some cases it had come illegally. Garbage cans had been torn apart and mail boxes opened. Addresses had been located and houses staked out. But the mission had been accomplished—and now the fireworks would begin.

Her head slumped to the side, and from the corner of her eye she labored to make out the letters on the overhead Husky sign. Then she turned and shuffled to the teller window. The chubby-cheeked woman inside the small glass booth slid her window open and smiled at the weathered patron. "Can I help you?"

The old woman's voice croaked in a crude southern accent. "You got a mail drop?" The words exhausted, her cheeks puckered involuntarily.

The teller's face maintained its luster. She offered to take the mail and drop it in the box.

Hesitant to give up her loot, the haggard face crinkled even more fiercely. "I got it—if'n you'll just show me where it's at." The teller directed her to the opposite window, where, one by one, the vagrant bent to insert each precious letter into the metal drop box. With a sigh of relief, she then returned to the street, opposite from where her hasty pilgrimage had begun. She plopped down on the bench and crossed her tired legs, waiting. In quiet conversation she mumbled, turned to the

side, listened and replied.

Fume-belching buses roared past as the old woman lingered. A handful of customers pulled from the cluttered boulevard to sidle up to the aging pumps to fill their metal coaches. Through it all the near-blind stray, hunkered, talked, listened. She sniffed the air. The passing traffic carried the rich aromas from the evening restaurants and stirred and blended them with exhaust vapors.

Once-glorious sun rays now melted into the reflection on the soft, orange clouds; the shadows faded into inescapable night. The old woman nodded, her head of matted gray hair slumping low, her lucid state of consciousness drifting into a dreamy world of bacon and grits. The thick-cut strips of pork sizzled on an old potbellied stove situated at the rear of a small shack. The crying of an infant wakened her from a morning nap.

“Ain’t you got my grub done yet?” A rancid voice from the past jerked the slumberer’s head to alert. The sound of a puttering Audi pulling into the station mingled with the gruff words. Its driver unfolded from his car, hoisted the deposit box onto his extended belly and shoved it in the trunk of the smoky old rattletrap. Finally, when the car had pulled away, the old woman let out a breath, stood, cocked an ear to the busy street, and raised her arm to hail an approaching bus.

Fifteen minutes later a single vagrant sat perched on a bench in front of American Bio Medical—wide suspenders hiking up tight trousers, a Yankees baseball cap pulled down low on his melon-sized head—and watched the Audi pull to a stop on Carson Street, in front of Eddie’s gym. A massive black man, legs like tree trunks, swayed from the glass door at the front of the dilapidated brick building. He collected the metal mailbox from the Audi’s trunk, tucking it like a tinker-toy under his balloon-like arm before returning to the gym. After locking the glass door behind him, he sauntered down the hallway, past the bench presses loaded with lead weights, and rapped his imposing knuckles on a thick metal door leading to the basement. In a few seconds the door opened. Two skinny arms protruded and pulled the box into the darkness of the stairwell. Then the door banged closed.

The mailbox was placed under a naked light bulb in the cluttered basement room. The dim bulb, hung by two wires fastened to a rusty nail extending from a rough-cut wooden rafter, swung back and forth ever

so gently. The boards of the ceiling groaned from the heavy load of the monstrous man, lifting weights from a bench above.

One of the two men in the basement slipped a shiny key into the metal box and popped the lock open. "I could take him," he hissed as he scanned the rafters and dumped the contents of the box on the table.

"Yeah, right! He'd squash you like a cockroach, Roy." The second man shook his mane of hair and let out a guttural laugh.

Roy dropped his hand in his pocket and jerked it out. The practiced rattle of tooled metal and hardened steel snapped to a stop and cut the dusty basement air as it faded into the cracks and crevices of the partially finished room. "Not if I sliced him." Roy held a ten-inch switchblade in his hand, waving it through the shadowy light like it was Excaliber.

"Why don't you shake that thing at him—I dare ya'," the second man scoffed before bending over the table to peer through a magnifying glass. With painstaking precision, he returned to his task of putting the final touches on the Nevada licence in his hand. His name was Ivan Lion—or Dean Tidwell, or half a dozen other aliases, depending on the state he lived in at the time. "He'll snap that blade in half and shove it down your scrawny throat. You'll end up like a baby bird with your beak flapping open."

"I'd cut him first," Roy boasted.

"Shut up Roy and finish your work. The place stinks like a barn and the crap's seeping through your teeth."

His glossy grin now dimmed, Roy folded the knife and jammed it in his worn jeans. He mumbled incoherently as he sorted and stacked the envelopes along the edges of the desk, recording numbers on a yellow legal pad. "I got a pile of 'em here that ain't got numbers," he said aloud.

Ivan peered over his half-rim glasses at the figures on the yellow pad, then went back to his work. "Process them the same as you do the others," he growled.

Roy glanced back and forth between the pile of tattered mail and the man giving orders, then thrust the loose mail under a nearby phone book. A few minutes later he stood at the base of the rough-framed basement stairs and tapped on a closed door. It creaked opened. When the bright light from the room flooded across Roy's face, his thin lips widened into a grin. "Jackie!" His wolfish eyes scanned his prey in a lustful

gaze. “How ‘bout you and I . . .”

“Stuff it, creep!” A woman’s gruff, baritone voice boomed from beyond the door. Then two shapely arms reached out and yanked away the mail he held in his arms. Roy propped his elbow against the wall and dropped one foot behind the other in a casual stance. The woman’s verbal onslaught took on an even more vicious tone. “You’re so stupid—you just don’t get it, do you?” Then, just as abrupt as the exchange had begun, the door slammed against its hinges.

Roy’s lecherous grin stretched to reveal a hint of dimples in his cheeks. Peeling his pride from off the wall, he pranced back to his desk like a barnyard cock. “She wants me. I’m telling you—she wants me.”

“Sure . . .” Ivan mumbled. “Whatever you say, Roy.”

The skinny man toppled into the squeaky chair, his back toward Ivan, and raised the phone book. *I’ll show them*, he thought as he peeled open the envelopes. *I’ll show them all!*

ONE

GREG HART SLUMPED behind the wheel of his '72 Olds Ninety-Eight, which reeked from the stench of dogs and rotting upholstery. His dark, greasy hair fell down over his high forehead in tufts each time he nodded forward, drifting closer to a drunken stupor. Clear, thick fluid oozed from his pointed nose—a rather grotesque appendage that flattened and widened as it spread down on his grim face. The residue clumped to his unshaven, deeply creased upper lip, then coursed sideways, making its way down over his chin to form long, rubbery strings on his grungy designer shirt. Between drinks he raised his head, blinked his dark, bloodshot eyes, and combed his filthy fingers through his stringy hair to pull it away from his face. Muttering aloud the jumble of words scrawled on the columns supporting the overpass, he desperately fought to stay awake. Vulgar utterances slipped from his wet lips between each gulp from the bottle he kept wedged tightly between his legs.

He'd long since stopped calling on God for help in overcoming his problems. His response to the summons and complaint filed by his estranged wife's attorney had been due three days ago. There would be no answer. His third—and last—attorney would no longer represent him without a minimum \$20,000 retainer, an amount that wouldn't even cover his past-due bill.

The lime green wreck was parked under the I-15, Rio Grande bridge, the dirty recesses of the city's arm-pit. The dim light of a nearby street lamp burned at his blurry eyes as a passing train rattled the rusty doors on the car and shook the ground as it rushed on its way, thundering past him under the bridge. Earlier that morning he'd stopped by the house to drop off his final paycheck so the children could eat. Linda had told him the trustees' sale of their home would be on the front steps of the county courthouse by ten the following morning.

The near-empty bottle of vodka was only the second thing he'd

stolen since he was 14. Those days were 25 long years behind.

His thoughts turned to his father: he wondered if the old man had yet discovered that he'd stolen the gun. Then the tears welled up again and spilled down his cheeks, the alcohol apparently refusing to give him the courage he'd hoped it would. He coaxed another sip from the bottle and waited for its full effect to take hold. He'd never been a heavy drinker, and each swallow burned less and less as he drew closer to the last.

Car tires, commanded by drivers clearly oblivious to his pain, whizzed by on the concrete bridge above, thumping the joints in an echoing, rhythmic tone as they advanced and passed overhead. Glancing down at the pistol resting on the passenger seat, partially obscured by his wrinkled jacket, Greg's eyes began to droop and his thoughts wandered. He needed to do it now before he drifted into an inescapable sleep.

Suddenly there came a knock at the driver's side window. "Excuse me," interrupted a muffled voice. "Do you know who owns that old car?" A young man in his early twenties, bent over, his face nearly pressed up against the smudged glass, was peering into the car. A pair of deep blue eyes strained in the dim street light to see inside. Greg's response was slow as he turned over the ignition key to roll down the power window just a crack.

"What?" came his slurred reply. The brunt of the young man's ice-blue stare shifted from the broken man and honed in on the gun. Then, hit by the blast of rank air wafting from the car, he pulled back several inches to escape its staggering force. His face—and stomach—turned momentarily sour.

Recovering somewhat, the fellow pointed to a beat-up, rusted-out '65 Mustang parked in front of the Olds and repeated, "That car; I was wondering if you knew who owned it."

Greg wagged his head and reached to cover the butt of the gun as, in the cloud of drunkenness, he fumbled for the "up" button. "No," he grumped.

"This car *you* got might be a classic some day," the young man pressed, his voice crackling through the narrowing gap. "How much would you take for it?"

Greg hesitated, then brought the window back down a bit. "Are you nuts? This's a piece 'a junk." His words were garbled as they tripped off his thick tongue.

The young man's stubborn enthusiasm caught the drunk off guard. "Is it running the big block four-fifty-five, or a small block three-fifty?"

"I don't have a clue what your talkin' 'bout, kid."

“The motor . . . is it a big block or small?”

The furrow in Greg’s forehead deepened. “Don’t know; leave me alone.”

“If you’ll let me take a look at the serial number on the dash, I can tell. If it’s a small block, the motor’s worth at least five hundred bucks.”

In truth, Mitch Wilson didn’t want the car, or the motor. But it was clear what the inebriated man was about to do. Mitch’s mind winced as it raced back to a time 16 years earlier when he was a happy-go-lucky seven-year-old—back to a day that had changed his life forever. His father had been a builder in Vegas, constructing mostly upper-end homes. The recession of the eighties had hit him hard. Having funded the building of seven or eight expensive spec houses, he’d found that he was unable to sell them and recoup his money. Over the ensuing months the interest had choked him until he finally snapped from the pressure. To make matters worse, young Mitch had been the first to walk in on the grisly scene.

Mitch blinked hard as he tried to shake the last reflected glimpse of his father from his mind. The spectacle, however, didn’t budge, continuing to slam against the battered door of memories he had tried to keep tightly shut. “Maybe you could buy your wife a nice gift and get you a cheap motorcycle to get around on,” he blurted out. Greg just stared at the young man, a puzzled look creasing his face. “The ring—I noticed you’re married. . . . Have any kids?”

Greg lowered his gaze to take in the wedding band clamped onto his finger. “She filed for divorce . . . been more than a month.”

“And how many children do you have?” The moment it escaped his lips Mitch feared he’d asked the wrong question.

“What makes you think I got kids?”

“You look like you’d be a good dad.”

“Two . . . two kids.”

“You have any pictures?”

“Listen, kid, I got something I’ve gotta do. Just get out of here and leave me alone.”

“Show me their pictures . . . and I’ll leave you alone,” he lied.

Greg wasn’t one to be rude. “If you promise to leave,” he sighed, reaching to his back pocket, fumbling for his wallet.

“I’ll leave as soon as we’re finished. If you’ll roll down the window, I’ll give you a hand with that.” Greg again hit the button to the auto-

matic window, which descended and stopped just six inches from fully open. The door remained locked; Mitch nonchalantly scanned the opening to see if he could get through. His six-foot-two, 195-pound body would fit, but could he move fast enough to snatch the gun before the drunk did? Greg folded back his wallet and eased it toward the open window. At that moment Mitch lunged forward, one hand seizing the wallet and the other to introduce himself, latching onto the listless man's wrist.

"Mitch Wilson," he breathed as casually as his voice could manage. Mitch hadn't expected such a struggle. Greg came to life as Mitch launched himself through the partially opened window. His belt buckle hung up on the glass as his feet kicked awkwardly, almost as if he were swimming in mid-air. His long arms groped blindly for the gun; the man struggled to reach it first. Mitch's fingers found its mark as, covering the trigger with two fingers, he wrenched it free in his viselike grip.

The blast of a train whistle ricocheted back and forth between the overpass walls, drowning out Greg's cursing. Mitch felt the window roll down under the unbalanced load of his body, now mostly in the car. Somehow the drunk had managed to open the car door, swinging his flailing foe away from the auto. With the hand he'd been holding onto the drunk, Mitch thrashed to his left and latched onto the steering wheel, yanking himself back toward the automobile. But in the meantime, Greg—remarkably spry for the state he was in—had slipped out of the car. Mitch struggled to lower the window and drag himself from his precarious position. Glancing around to see where the drunk had gone, he spied the droop-shouldered figure making for the train tracks.

A second train, slow-moving, blasted its signal again as Greg staggered onto the tracks and blinked up into its lights. Mitch didn't stand a chance to reach him before the train would meet him head on. Reflexively he turned his head, protecting himself against the inevitable gruesome jolt of steel on flesh.

And then, in the echoing cacophony around him, unfolded in Mitch's mind a slow-motion, frame-by-frame scenario. Having turned away, his gaze fell on the wallet, which lay open on the ground. The street lamp under the bridge cast a surreal, eerie, luminescent glow. Mitch's eyes took in the photo, revealing a family of four . . . a boy who appeared to be nine or ten . . . a little girl, probably five or six. Like the samples one sees on the walls of photograph studios, they stood in front of their proud parents, smiling for the camera—the perfect, all-American family.

Then the train's horn blared again, a long and piercing blow that disengaged Mitch from his dreamlike state. He spun around once more to witness the jumbled display. Massive steel wheels locked and screeched as they sparked and skidded down the smooth metal rails. Even as Mitch bent and picked up the wallet, he could see the wild look in Greg's eyes, eyes now trained on him, fixed on the young man holding his wallet. Between blasts of air coming from the train's horn, Mitch felt the air rise from his lungs in a discordant, caterwauling scream. "Your son!"

In that split second, Greg crouched, apparently in a bid to lunge free. Mitch looked on in horror as the drunk pushed off from the heavy metal locomotive as the force of its onslaught hurled him from the tracks. He disappeared from view in the far shadow of the hundred-car train, the big engine sliding past, coming to rest another 300 feet down the track before the heavy load rattled to a complete stop.

The train's engineer scrambled down to see what was left of the man who moments before had stood on his track. The big engine bearing down on its victim had obscured his view; the entire sequence of events had happened too fast. Mitch's eyes locked onto those of the engineers, then both peered out into the darkness, between rail cars, toward the opposite side of the locomotive. The drunken man had disappeared from view.

"He jumped off!" Mitch shouted over the rumbling engine.

The old engineer's glassy-eyed gaze now centered on the objects gripped tightly in Mitch's hands: a gun and a wallet. "You better give those to me, son," he demanded, stretching out a hand. "You don't need to make it any worse than it already is."

Mitch stared dumbly down at the gun, then back at the shaken engineer. A second man was running toward them from the locomotive. He knew exactly what the engineer was thinking. *And it wasn't going to happen to him again.* Mitch instinctively stuffed the wallet in his front pocket and jammed the gun under his belt. He turned and pulled himself up between two rail cars, then, hopping down on the other side, ran—just ran. A beautifully restored '66 red Chevy Camaro was parked behind the old Mustang; he jumped in and sped away, squealing tires knifing into the still night. The heavyset engineer struggled to squeeze through the cars. He couldn't get over in time to see the sporty car pull from under the bridge, out of sight.

Mitch gunned the car several blocks down the deserted road, then turned, going south on Las Vegas Boulevard. His heart raced as he wondered—as he had thousands of times before—what could cause a man so much pain that he was willing to die by his own hand, leaving his loved ones behind to suffer the loss. Spinning the wheel to the left, he veered down a dark street, where he pulled to the curb and opened the wallet again. “Greg Hart,” he read on the driver’s license. The accompanying address indicated he lived in a ritzy part of town near the country club.

Leaning back in the seat of the car, Mitch closed his eyes and allowed the flood gates to open. It had been a cool winter day, at least by Las Vegas standards. He was seven years old. His mother had picked him up from school. His second grade class had just finished the final performance of Scrooge—and his dad hadn’t made it. Mitch, disheartened, had played Marley, the ghost who visited Scrooge in chains. He’d desperately wanted his father there—to feel his approval, to sense that he cared.

When the garage door didn’t open, his mother had parked on the driveway. The two of them stepped onto the front porch. Mitch, the corners of his mouth turned down, waited as his mother unlocked the fine, carved wooden door leading to the hallway of the 6,000-square-foot custom-built home. She suggested he call his dad using the two-way radio in her husband’s office. Mad at him for not having shown up, Mitch refused. After all, his dad had promised.

His mother had paused in the kitchen to read a note from his father, while Mitch plodded on through the house to the garage to see if he could open the door, his young mechanical curiosity getting the better of him. His dad’s pickup truck was parked in its usual spot, and after turning on the light, the boy noticed his father slumped over the wheel, seemingly asleep. Mitch promptly trudged down the steps to give his dad “what for.” His mother had come to the doorway and screamed the same moment Mitch opened the truck’s door.

Mitch drew a deep breath before he opened his eyes. The putrid smell filling his nostrils was almost as thick as it had been 16 years earlier. He leaned forward and brushed the stinging tears from his face, once again slamming the memories behind the battered door of his mind. Then he clambered out of the car and opened the trunk. Within three minutes he’d replaced his car’s license plate with one he conveniently kept inside. He knew it was against the law, but rationalized using someone else’s plates by telling himself he’d have to stay out of

trouble or lose his car to impound. He could trade the car for one of his others, but didn't think the old engineer had seen what he was driving. He'd wait to make the switch until the weekend when he saw his grandpa.

Climbing back behind the wheel, he slipped the gun and wallet in the glove box before firing up the engine. Glancing at the gauges, Mitch remembered where he had been going in the first place. The gas gauge read below empty. He turned onto Washington Street and headed east toward Rancho Drive. It was late, and Bino might have already headed home. Still he went. Mitch had entrusted Bino with selling his cars. How he did it Mitch wasn't sure, but Bino could sell electric heaters on a hot summer day.

Mitch was anxious to get home. He hadn't seen or talked to his wife, Stephanie, all day. She had scheduled a visit with the obstetrician at four to see if they had misjudged her due date. He couldn't stand to be in the room while she was being examined. He turned ill and defensive every time he saw the doctor get close to his beautiful bride. Stef had told him she didn't mind a bit that he didn't go with her. She was too polite to tell him what she really thought: that he was being childish, not to mention rude. He probably could have gone today, since a sonogram isn't an invasive procedure. Stephanie had promised to bring back pictures—if, that is, the technician or doctor would give them to her.

TWO

KITTY'S ESCORT SERVICES. The words, lettered in gold leaf, arched across the tinted plate glass window on the front of the old brick building. Antique copper light fixtures, suspended high above the window, cast soft, inviting rays against the glass that reflected golden beams of light onto the yellow-brick sidewalk leading up to the door. The larger of two men, standing at the door, pressed his thick, rough finger on the bell and pulled at the collar of his heavily starched shirt, buttoned high on his neck, as he shifted nervously on his feet.

"Good evening," a soft voice crackled over the intercom. "Do you have an appointment?"

"It's Frank," the big man in his mid-twenties announced huskily.

"Frankie, what a treat," the voice lured. "Is your visit business or *pleasure* this evening?"

"Knock it off," scoffed the man in his roughest, talking-out-of-the-side-of-your-mouth Jersey accent. "I got a guy looks like the picture." Frank Domenico shifted his weight again, making his Italian patent leather shoes squeak. Perspiration ringed his white shirt at the arms and drooped down his back.

"We'll be right down," the woman teased.

"A hundred bucks, all the drinks I want, a woman, and a change of clothes?" the smaller man whined, hitching up his shabby pants and wiping a shirt-sleeve across his runny nose. Frankie shot the pathetic vagrant a pitiless glance. Nameless, faceless, hidden behind months of beard, dirt, and years of sorrow, the slouched figure next to him flinched and stepped a half-step away.

Frank's threatening, whispered response came from deep within his throat. "Just do like the lady says. Act like you're the richest man in Vegas tonight."

"Fine by me—but I want my hundred 'fore I start."

Frank reached deep in the pocket of his tailored slacks and pulled

out a clip of cash as the door swung open. The vagrant turned momentarily to stare at the long, slender legs of his new hostess, then his eyeballs wheeled back to focus on the cash Frank had stripped from his wad.

"This must be Mr. Glover, from California," the hostess said, fingering in one hand the photo of a distinctly different man. She reached out and put her other arm around the man's neck and welcomed him in. "Would you like a drink, Mr. Glover?"

The vagrant snatched the cash from Frank, gave him one last 'this is too good to be true' look, stepped into the parlor and took a filled champagne glass from the woman. "You can call me whatever you want lady," he gurgled.

"I'll be back in an hour," Frank said, pushing the door closed.

The hostess, Kitty, pushed her head back out the opening. "This mess will take us at least two," she whispered.

"Vinnie wants him out by 11:00."

"This guy's blood's so thin he'll be able to stay on his feet all night. What's it matter if it takes one hour or two?"

"I do what Vinnie says. I'll be back in an hour."

"Frankie, that's what I like about you, you big hunk. That raw obedience of yours. You come back in an hour like Vinnie told you, and if this guy isn't ready I'll *personally* keep you entertained."

Frank squirmed again. "Is this a new look?" Kitty asked.

"Vinnie tol' me I have to look more like a businessman," he blushed. "Says we ain't in Jersey no more."

"Well, I like it. You don't look like such a thug. Now hurry back, you big brute."

Frank squirmed again and tugged at his shirt collar. "Vinnie'll ..."

"Vinnie-shminnie. . . . He doesn't need to know a thing." Kitty scrunched her nose and purred as Frank turned and walked away.

Mitch pulled into the old Husky station on Rancho Drive, got out and lifted the nozzle from the pump. Peering toward the pay booth, he noticed Bino was working later than usual. The tall slender figure inside slowly rose to his feet and slid open the teller window. Billows of smoke poured from the small booth, spilled down its grimy front and drifted to the west on the warm desert wind. "I got that shipment of stereos . . . you've been waiting for," he announced between labored breaths.

“They hot?”

“I never sell anything that’s hot,” Bino chuckled in his raspy voice, the smile on his face causing waves of rough, creased skin to fold like a fan from the corners of a set of whimsical eyes.

“Right.”

“These units were from a closeout buy. . . . It’ll help sell that car you just got finished.”

“The GTO?”

“I’ve got a buyer for it . . . if you’ve got her ready.”

“They put tires and wheels on today. You got the players?”

“Right here.” Bino lifted a box to the window.

“My cards are maxed—can I charge it?”

“Your credit’s good here, kid.” The man began to cough. He lifted the oxygen hose that draped from his weathered neck up to his long nose.

Mitch frowned. “I thought you said you were going to quit that habit ‘fore it killed you.”

Bino’s throaty reply came between coughs. “Couldn’t . . . get past the . . . second day.”

Mitch’s casual gaze came to rest on a point over his friend’s shoulder. Then he got to the heart of his visit. “You think you can find out about someone for me?”

“Who is it—what do you need to know?”

Mitch rattled off the license number and address by heart. “His name’s Greg Hart. I just stopped him from blowing his brains out under the overpass, by the interchange.”

Bino nodded.

“He was driving an Olds . . . expired tags from ‘91.” Mitch repeated the plate number as Bino scribbled it down on a notepad. “I’m more than a little curious why he wanted to die.”

“This is no small order. . . . You’ll owe me . . . big-time for . . . this one.”

Mitch didn’t mind. It was important, and he and Bino always did each other favors. Bino Dalton was the best-connected two-bit fence he’d ever met—not that he’d known any other men at all like the big-talking chain-smoker with the perpetual listening ear. Make that *two* impressive ears, gargantuan appendages that doubled back and rested tightly against his black hair, which went from bushy to sparse to completely

missing on top. Instead, sun spots dotted the crown of his head. He kept a thin, well-trimmed moustache that ran across his wide smile, extending past his slight lips from one wrinkled cheek to the other. He reminded Mitch of Inspector Clouseau from the popular Pink Panther movies of the '70s. "Bino" wasn't his real name, but no one cared. He'd picked up the moniker somewhere during his drinking and gambling days, and somehow it stuck. He claimed to be reformed now, and never drank or even dropped so much as a dime in a machine anymore. The hard life had taken its toll, though, and his degenerating 47-year-old body looked more like it had seen 70 extra-harsh Siberian winters. The doctors said he wouldn't last three more years unless he quit smoking.

Mitch never bought anything from Bino that he couldn't get a receipt for. *Borrowed* plates were one thing; stolen property was out of the question. He'd probably have to fix a dent or tune up one of Bino's friend's cars for this favor. Again, no big deal.

The pump stopped at \$32.15. "If you're tight, I'll put the gas . . . the gas on a ticket, too," Bino offered.

"Stephanie gets paid in two days. I'll pay you then."

"Nah . . . you can wait if you want . . ." said the con artist, catching his breath, "'til you sell the goat" (referring to the Pontiac GTO). He slid a charge slip and a pen out on the counter. "When do you go to finals?"

"Next week, if I can afford it." Mitch popped open the trunk to put the stereo away.

"Why don't you bring the car by tomorrow—about four." Bino sucked in a deep breath. "I'll tell my contact to come and look at it then."

"Okay." Mitch slammed the trunk shut, hooked the nozzle back on the pump and hopped back in his car. "See you tomorrow."

For the past several weeks he'd been working late in Mike Hutchings' Body & Paint to get the Camaro finished. Mike had opened the new business on the north side of town just two months earlier. The two of them enjoyed their business relationship. For every hour Mitch worked on Mike's jobs, he got an hour or two of free shop time. It was better than driving back to his grandpa's place near Logandale, an hour away. And Mike got the benefit of having a part-time employee without all the attached paperwork and taxes.

Besides, Mitch could do more work in three hours than any full-time man, which was why he was going to vocational finals. Earlier in the year, at

the insistence of his body shop instructor, he'd decided to enter the state competition, which he won, hands-down. No one even came close to his incredibly high scores in time and quality. Still, he only took the body shop class for an easy credit and for a handy place to work on his cars.

If only he'd taken high school seriously. Then he would have been accepted into a real college instead of a vocational school. He'd been a 4.0 student—until, that is, he'd messed with the wrong girl, a girl who wanted fast cars, a good time, money and the basketball captain's heart and hand. She hadn't cared about her future, nor his. It had taken the convenience store arrest to wake him up to what his grandpa had been telling him all along.

Anyway, no sense in worrying about the past; he had a promising future to look forward to. He was going to be the best dad any kid ever had.

The older, principally white neighborhood was well-marked with gang graffiti, broken glass and littered yards. A half-dozen young male juveniles with baggy, low-hanging pants, tank-tops, and bandanas tied around their heads milled aimlessly about. A few others rested their haunches on hot rods parked near the entrance to the cul-de-sac where Mitch and Stephanie lived. Several of them raised their arms, flashing their fingers in defiant, heckling gestures as Mitch drove past. In his youth he'd never been party to such rudeness. His grandpa would have broken his finger—or so he threatened—if he'd ever seen him raise his hand in such a vulgar display.

Mitch smiled and returned the gesture as he revved the engine on the Camaro, squealing its tires. Somehow he'd made good enough friends with the punks that the one-fingered salute was more like a gang greeting than an insult.

He pulled up to the end of the driveway, pressed the automatic door opener, and eased into the two-car garage. Other than low rent, it was the only thing about the house and neighborhood he liked. The crime rate ran high, but the price was right, providing them a house with a garage at the cost of a cheap apartment. Without the garage his cars would never make it in such a neighborhood. The GTO parked inside shone, its new chrome wheels glistening in the reflected glow of Mitch's headlights. Stef had picked it up after her appointment, but she didn't much like driving his muscle cars. She said the crummy guys were always hitting

on her when she went by in them. He knew she preferred her plain white Ford Escort.

Mitch hit the switch on the visor and the double door began to lower. The old motor sputtered and slowed as he stepped to the rear of the car and lent a helping hand. It just didn't have the power to close all the way. He'd recently tightened the lift springs in hopes that they had just been too loose to move the heavy wooden door, but now the extra torque on the springs kept the under-powered motor from doing the job. One more thing the landlord refused to repair.

As he scaled the two steps to the kitchen door, Mitch decided he wouldn't tell his wife about his run-in with Greg Hart. She didn't like him going to Bino's, either, so that information would also remain unspoken. Stephanie sat at the kitchen table reading a parenting book when he stepped in the doorway. She looked up at him, her soft eyes gleaming. There was a warmer glow about her than usual.

"Hi," she greeted in a hushed tone.

"You look beautiful."

Her long blonde hair brushed the tabletop. She reached up and drew it back behind her ear. "I tried to call Mike's place, but his line's been disconnected."

"He's had a rough go of it. Says he's going to pack it up. . . . What's up?"

"Come and sit down," she grinned. Her perfectly straight teeth sparkled, matching the whites of her big, half-moon-shaped eyes. Mitch was never more in love with her than he had been the last few months. Even though her skinny little waist was disappearing, she'd never seemed more alluring. She drew two dark images from the back of her book and laid them gently on the table. "Would you like to meet your children?"

Mitch grappled to read her face to see what she meant. "You mean my son?" He was convinced they were going to have a boy; she was sure it was a girl. The running argument of "he says son, she says daughter" had acted as a source of good-natured teasing ever since they'd learned of Stephanie's "motherly way" condition.

Stephanie's eyes cast a mischievous twinkle. "Your daughter, too."

Dumbfounded, Mitch managed to find a seat. For some reason his eyes refused to focus. He didn't have a clue what he was looking at, anyway. After a few awkward moments, he glanced up and, in a state of shock,

mumbled, “We’re having *two*?”

Stephanie nodded, her smile wide and full, accentuating her sensuously rounded cheeks. “Let me show you.” Her index finger traced along the lines of the first image as she beamed with excitement. “This head belongs to your son. . . . See his tiny hands and feet?” Then, using a pencil she pulled from behind her right ear, she made a series of light arcs, outlining the blurry shapes. Mitch watched in complete fascination. Under her direction, he could see what he hadn’t seen before. “Down here are his male parts.” She pointed to a lighter area.

“Whoa!” he gasped. “Quite the kid.”

“Stop it,” she chided, delivering a loving slap on his shoulder. “And this is your daughter,” she continued, pointing to the second image, “—at least the doctor *thinks* it’s a girl. He couldn’t identify any external organs; it’s possible they’re just hidden.”

Mitch swivelled his head 90 degrees to the side, peering over at his wife, then returned his gaze to the two negatives. “She’s upside down. . . . Are these her feet or his?”

“Probably his.”

“I was going to say, that would be one heck of a position to have to stay scrunched up in.” Mitch took in a deep breath, still absorbed in the images, soaking in the wonder of it all. “Twins! Are they identical?”

The corners of Stephanie’s mouth hiked, her eyebrows lifted, and her eyes locked onto Mitch’s face to see if he’d in fact thought through his question. “A boy and a girl?” she questioned.

Mitch shrugged and pulled a face—as if he’d just caught a whiff of rotten eggs. “I guess that would be impossible.”

Stephanie smiled and nodded. “To tell you the truth, for a split second I wondered the same thing.” Again she peered through the two-foot void between them as Mitch stared down once more at the images, a distant look in his eye. For a full minute the two of them sat in silence. She knew what he was thinking, and wished she could help. Mitch had always longed for a family of his own, a father and mother with whom he could share the joyous news. He wanted to be the best dad the world ever knew. At length, she could hold back the question no longer. Placing her slender hand gently on his, she caught his gaze with her hazel eyes. “What are you thinking?”

His soft smile met hers. “I couldn’t ask for anything more. I have a

gorgeous wife who'll soon give me two children of my own. . . ." His thought drifted off. "And how are you doing?" He knew she wished her relationship with her own parents was different, too.

"I wish I could call them . . . let them know."

"So let's do it. The worst they can do is tell us to get lost."

"I can't; I don't think I could stand the rejection again."

Mitch studied the angles of her angelic face. An elusive, transparent sadness seemed to seep through the beauty. Stephanie's parents lived in a ritzy part of town. They'd threatened to disown her if she had anything more to do with the boy from the junkyard. Unlike their daughter, they'd been unable or unwilling to see past Mitch's rough edges. She'd first met him at a high school varsity basketball game, where, though still a Junior, he was captain of the visiting team. She was the squad leader of the home-team cheerleaders. They'd bumped into each other again a few hours later at a local hamburger joint, some smutty girl hanging on his sleeve. Though he tried to hide it, he'd seemed embarrassed.

A year later, as Seniors, they met again during the same high school rivalry, but by then Mitch was no longer on the team. Stephanie later had found out he'd been cut because of his arrest in an armed robbery at a Las Vegas convenience store that fateful night a year before.

It had all happened so fast, entirely without warning. Mitch hadn't known what his friends were up to. He was driving. They'd stopped so his friends could buy a soda—when suddenly they came racing out, a case of beer under each arm, waving a gun in the air and screaming for him to take off. Mitch had panicked and sped away in his partly-restored Cougar.

It was three days before the police chief knocked on his grandpa's door to make the arrest. In a way, it was actually a relief. The system tried him as an adult, but because of his cooperation and spotless record he'd gotten only six months in jail and one year probation.

Mitch raised his hand to brush Stephanie's hair behind her ear, his eyes locked on hers. Gently he reached back to caress her neck. Her face was clean and inviting; she rarely wore makeup, her dark eyebrows and long eyelashes hardly needing any help.

"I love you," he whispered, leaning toward her to kiss her soft, full lips. She raised her hand and ran it through his uncombed, short-cropped hair.

The kiss was warm and passionate as they shared the moment.

The violent squealing of tires accompanied by angry yells outside jolted their thoughts back to reality—back to where they lived, back to the awful ugliness of their neighborhood.

“I’ve got a possible buyer for the goat,” Mitch announced. “I just need to put a stereo in it so I can show it tomorrow. If I can sell it—and a few more like it—we’ll have enough money to get out of here and help with school. You won’t have to work.” Mitch stood and began sorting through the mail. Scowling, he dropped one credit card application in the wastebasket. Another, boasting a “preapproved 2.9% introductory rate,” he returned to the table.

Stephanie clasped her hands behind her head, casting him her trademark smile—sly, inviting, sumptuous. “I was hoping we could celebrate.”

Mitch didn’t want to hurt her feelings, but the stereo was important. “Will you wait 20 minutes for me to put in the player?”

“I’d wait all night if I had to,” she said as he stood to leave.

“I won’t be long.” Mitch guided two fingers into the collar of his T-shirt and yanked it from his formed body. He waved his other hand back and forth as if to cool himself down, the muscles rippling in his forearm. “I’ll be back,” he assured, lowering his voice an octave and punctuating the words as if she hadn’t heard the first time.

“And I’ll be waiting,” she winked seductively.

Mitch’s thoughts were far from the routine task of installing the stereo. His body took over, mechanically navigating through the simple, step-by-step procedure. Instead, his mind traversed back 14 years, coming to rest on Natalie, the young therapist who had been assigned to his case by the Department of Human Services after his father’s death. He had met with her several times. She helped him sort out his complex feelings. He’d always refused to discuss the details of what he saw when he opened the door to his father’s truck, and she never forced him to relive that memory. Natalie had been his hero. She told him that someday he’d open the door himself and let out all the ugly thoughts—when he was ready to let them go.

His mother had suffered a bombardment of lawsuits, lawyers, criminal accusations, together with the overwhelming loss of her husband. Young Mitch, over the ensuing months, had spent more and more time with his

Grandpa Wilson and less with Natalie and his mother, even starting third grade at a school near his grandpa's business. Then after his mother's disappearance, Grandpa Wilson was awarded temporary custody—"Kinship placement," the court called it. Even though the social worker resisted the placement, citing the grandfather's wrecking-yard home as an "undesirable, unfit environment" in which to raise a boy, the elderly man got leeway as Mitch's only close living relative.

When his mother suddenly showed up three years later, Mitch wouldn't have anything to do with her, or her new husband. Wracked by so much guilt for abandoning her son, she'd finally left him in the care of his grandpa, never to return.

Grandpa Wilson was a bit of an old-fashioned gent, one who didn't have the slightest use for therapists or anti-depressants. Hard work, he preached, was the best and only antidote to such tommyrot. Hard work: that's what had gotten him through the death of his own wife five years before Mitch moved in. And Mitch soon had adopted a like-minded approach, taking on every project with a passion. Hard work—it *almost* succeeded in keeping the door of his memory tightly sealed, leaving the raw nerves of utter grief and guilt untouched since that dreadful day long ago.

THREE

FRANK EASED HIS CONSIDERABLE bulk down on a comfortable lounge chair in the dimly lit parlor. His interest wandered to the collection of colorful portraits that adorned the wall opposite him. From each stared a pair of seductive eyes backed by a fabulously sexy face. As one's eyes wafted downward, he would behold a perfect body, clothed in stylish, figure-enhancing garb. If the eyeballs of one who gazed at the photo could be peeled away from the heavenly body before him, he would notice that beneath the adorned frame hung a brass plaque. Etched in bold letters was the pseudonym of the girl, a reference to her individual personality and unique "charms."

Out of earshot, two of the girls—whose photos garnished the wall—whispered quietly to each other from around the corner.

"He's just a big dumb ox, too afraid of Vinnie to ever go through with anything."

"But what if he did?"

"He won't. I'm tellin' you, Kitty's been playing games with him for months. Come on—she said to tease him while she finishes."

The women flounced into the parlor, sliding themselves onto the couch at each side of Frank, who struggled to stand. Rayna, a tall, slender blonde with beautiful blue eyes, dark and bloodshot from the drugs—dressed in almost nothing—fastened a hand on the man's chest and the other on his thigh, pressing him gently back to the chair. "You don't got to get up on our account, Frankie." As if to underscore the point, she swung a leg over Frank's, her calf coming to rest on his lap. "You just lie back, now." As she spoke she tried to hide her crooked teeth through her smile.

"Just trying to be a gentleman," Frank squirmed.

"Gentleman or not, you ain't nothing like Vinnie. You really cousins?" She leaned in, close to his face, studying his features.

Frank smirked and nodded in proud acknowledgment. "My dad and

his were brothers, 'least 'til his ol' man were whacked. My ol' man says if I pay close attention I might learn a thing or two from Vinnie. He got brains, you know; I only got muscle."

"And plenty of it." Rayna, knowing by experience where to turn her attentions, reached over and stroked Frank's arms and chest. Then, motioning to the other girl, she continued, "Frankie, this is Violet. She's going to keep you company while I go get dressed."

"I know who she is." Frank jerked his boxer-dog chin toward the wall. "I seen her picture before you came in."

"You be gentle with her—she's new here."

"I will." Frank placed his big hands on the couch, as if he'd been caught with them in the cookie jar. His massive chest expanded and contracted in rapid succession. "Vinnie said I can't even touch, or he'll do me."

Rayna lifted the hand nearest her and rested it on his thigh, then angled her body across his broad chest and pressed her lips against those of her wild-eyed target. Frank's arm flexed and his fingers curled up as Rayna leaned into him. Then, mustering every wile in her repertoire, she gently bit his lower lip, pulled away and breathed, "See, he don't even know. Besides, a big strong man like you don't need to be afraid a' nobody."

"I ain't afraid!" Frank bellowed as he shot up from the chair, sending Rayna cartwheeling away. "I ain't got no more chances. The ol' man told me I don't do what Vinnie says . . . he'll whack me." He raised his fist to strike, his eyes bulging, his jaw hardened like granite.

"Frankie," a voice echoed from the doorway. "You hit my girl, an' she won't be presentable." Frank disengaged his fist and ran his palm across his short military style hair cut. His menacing glare raised to meet Kitty's, who stood, hands on hips, in the hallway. Rayna slithered back farther out of Frank's reach and Violet cowered from the room. "Frank, why don't you wait in the car. They'll be out in ten minutes."

Frank scratched his scalp nervously and turned across toward the door. Kitty flicked her head to the side, a wordless cue to Rayna to go get herself dressed. In ten minutes Kitty was opening the door to the old limousine, parked on the curb, ushering into the back seat an elderly, well dressed gentleman, sporting a new haircut and a fresh shave. A convention badge was pinned to his slightly disheveled suit and a

drink was clasped in his hand. Rayna, now dressed to kill, climbed in beside him and shot a fearful glance toward Kitty.

“You okay, Frankie?” Kitty asked, poking her head inside the car.

Frank immediately became the sorry little school boy, slumped in front of the principal’s desk. “I’m sorry, Miss Kitty,” he whimpered. “I didn’t mean no harm. You don’t need to tell . . .”

“Of course not,” Kitty interrupted. “You just do your job tonight. It’s already forgotten.” She pressed a billfold into Rayna’s hand. “The MasterCard’s good for 50; run it first. American Express is unlimited. Stop after the first call for approval. The others are good for only about 25 each. I’ll call you when we’re ready to tuck him in for the night.”

Frank pulled away from the curb and soon steered the vehicle into a space outside of the Tropicana. Rayna helped Mr. Glover, the imposter, from the car and headed for the cashier. Within moments—after a very sloppy signature and a quick stop at the bar—the two casually made their way toward the black-jack table with ten grand in chips and new drinks in hand.

Within 20 short minutes, a span filled with myriad hushed whispers from Rayna, the fake Mr. Glover had dropped \$1,500 and change on the table. The two then stopped at the bar for another drink, cashed in the chips and took their winnings to the car. The next stop was the MGM Grand.

By early morning the vagrant, Mr. Glover, was back on the street with a hundred bucks in the pocket of his new suit, snoring loudly, on his way to a terrible hang-over, while the real Mr. Glover snuggled in a hotel bed, dreaming about the sensual evening with one of Kitty’s other girls.

It was before dawn when Mitch eased the gold GTO out from the garage. His early schedule allowed him the hours he needed to build his hotrods. More money was brought in building muscle cars than he ever could dream of making working a part-time job. The only disadvantages were the long stretches between pay checks. Grandpa’s wrecking yard still had 20 or 30 restorable big-dollar vehicles. Problem was, each seemed to need more and more work as the better cars were finished and sold off. The parts his grandpa didn’t have in the lot seemed like a snap for Bino to get his hands on. The decrepit, middle aged fellow never seemed to run out of sources.

Bino made friends faster than blue lightning. Mitch had become a loyal customer after his first fillup, the day two years earlier when he'd driven a '56 Chevy two-door hard-top in for a few dollars' worth of gas. Bino had noticed the hood chrome was missing and asked if Mitch had been looking for it. Two days—and fifty bucks—later, Mitch had put the final touch on the black street rod. And a few months after that, Bino had helped him sell the car for \$24,000, four thousand more than Mitch had thought he'd get. And Bino's "fee" had come to only twelve hundred bucks.

Mitch always parked in the automotive storage area of the college. He hadn't paid for a parking sticker since his first semester. The instructors constantly threatened the students that their cars would be towed, but no one ever followed through. Anyway, everyone would want to give this polished beauty the once-over. The car would easily bring \$28,000—most of which would go toward credit card payments. Figuring in the tires from the day before, Mitch was in debt more than \$20,000. He figured that his system worked alright: he'd pay cash to make most of the initial repairs, then finish up by using the cards. The interest was a little higher than at a bank, but the upside was that he didn't need to deal with any loan officers. With the Camaro and the Firebird at his grandpa's place, he had another \$25,000 in inventory. The Firebird still needed four or five thousand more to finish off its interior and to buy some nice tires.

The half hour before class allowed enough time to get ready for his psychology final. Mitch quickly reviewed his notes, but didn't see anything he hadn't already committed to memory. His perfect grade-point average just might propel his dream of medical school back on track. Mitch planned on attending the University Nevada, Las Vegas, and after that hoped to get into Harvard. Proving himself a good student after his high school disaster was turning out to be ten times harder than if he'd just done it right in the first place.

Mitch didn't know exactly which field he wanted to go into. He was going to take a wait-and-see approach. His grandpa always spoke poorly of the psychiatric field of medicine. Somehow the old man blamed the death of his wife on the therapist who had been treating her at the time.

Stephanie, turning sideways then once more to the front, posed in front of the full-length mirror, appraising her changing figure. The waistband of her underwear stretched markedly downward, dipping below her bulg-

ing tummy. She'd spent the last several weeks trying to convince herself it was hardly noticeable. Now, in light of the expectant twins, her stomach was the first thing she saw—and had convinced herself that it was the *only* thing others saw. Mitch jokingly—or not?—claimed her nose, too, was elongating ever so slightly.

The selection of clothing that still fit seemed to be rapidly diminishing. The night before she and Mitch had discussed using her paycheck to buy a few maternity outfits. They both agreed that she should, deciding that if the car didn't sell they could use the new credit application for a fifth card and float the payments a bit longer.

Though they were both ecstatic, the happy couple had chosen to keep the news of their babies a secret to avoid the constant bombardment of 'How soon are you due?' questions that would surely follow. Four months was long enough. Work began at 9:30, and Stephanie could hardly wait to tell her best friend Maggie about the twins and show off the images. Maggie, intuitive soul that she was, had guessed that her coworker was pregnant the first month, but had reluctantly agreed to keep it hush-hush.

After trying on several outfits, seeking the right combination of clothes that didn't accentuate her bulging tummy, Stephanie meandered into the kitchen and choked down a small pastry from the fridge. Hopefully the terrible bouts with morning sickness were almost over.

Before leaving for work, she lifted the trash bag from the receptacle near the kitchen table and drew the yellow draw strings into a bow before carrying it out the back door to deposit it in the bin. Trash day, she remembered. As usual, Al Kostecki, their next-door neighbor, was standing out on his porch in his boxer shorts with a beer in one hand, the other busily engaged in reaching around his enormous, furry gut to vigorously scratch his crotch. When Stephanie rounded the corner of the garage and saw him, she turned away, directing her gaze instead out to the street, hoping to avoid eye contact until she could climb into her car.

Al was a squat, no-neck sort, the kind of guy who envisions himself with the chiseled physique of an Arnold Schwarzenegger. A wide gap separated his front teeth and a long, grotesque scar intersected his left eyebrow. In a menacing and accented growl, he often bragged of his body-building days in Europe. He'd defected from the Soviet Union during the '64 Olympic games in Tokyo and petitioned the U.S. Embassy for asy-

lum. Amid the hoopla and political rhetoric, he became a short-lived hero in America.

At the close of his allotted 15 minutes of fame, Al had gone on to coach young Olympic gymnastic and weightlifting hopefuls—until, that is, a few of the young gymnasts accused him of sexual misconduct. Al claimed that the charges had ruined his life—just another plot to send him back to face similar charges in Kazakhstan. According to him, the Russians had been furious that he'd skipped the country, and so had trumped up charges so they could extradite him. He would be punished as a traitor, used as an example . . . or so he claimed.

Al had ended up in Vegas a few years later, working as a bouncer in a topless bar, the Silver Nugget. It was there he'd met his wife Joan, a waitress at the time, and now the sole breadwinner for the family. A tough old broad with a deep, raspy smoker's voice and a blonde wig that curled under her round, pink-painted face and swooped upward to graze her eyebrows, Joan worked the evening shift. Like her lewd husband, she was real a piece of work. A skimpy outfit betrayed a pair of wrinkly, sun-worn legs and a bottomless ravine of cleavage between sagging breasts, the result of age, gravity, and three baby boys, progeny who over the years had ripened into rotten and lazy adults, living at home, still sucking their mother dry.

"Goods mornink, gurl," Al grunted. His thick, guttural inflection sent air whistling through his teeth as he spoke. He lumbered down the steps to match Stephanie's quickened pace.

She wanted nothing to do with the creep. Once, after he'd wandered over to talk to Mitch—busy tuning up a carburetor at the time—he'd brushed up against her with his shirtless torso and remarked on her shapely, tan legs. Mitch's sulphurous glare went unheeded. A smarter man would have been stopped in his tracks by such a blatant warning flare. Problem was, Al was not a smart man. The degenerate continued to leer at her every chance he got. Since that incident, Stephanie only hung around Mitch when he was working in the garage, with the door closed. Even so, the men in the neighborhood were always coming over to borrow a tool or to ask how to fix one gizmo or another.

"Jou look veautiful today." Al shuffled ponderously behind Stephanie and deposited his hefty forearms on the driver's door to her Escort. Stephanie turned toward him and stepped back a few feet, out of his reach. "That

Mitch is lucky man to own such veauty.” His ogling eyes descended to take in her stomach. “Sometink different, I see.”

Stephanie, a good five inches taller than Al, waited for him to step aside. “I need to go. I’m going to be late for work,” she stammered, folding her arms impatiently, shielding against her bosom the doubled-over images of her babies.

Al reached down and scratched again, took another sip from his beer, and leisurely turned away. “Don’t vant dat,” he muttered sarcastically. Then he pivoted once more, sucked his gut back up to his chest where it had been 25 years earlier, gripped the empty can between the palms of his hands and crushed the empty cylinder, top to bottom.

Stephanie had seen him do it before, from a distance, laughing at the pathetic sight of the 55-year-old behemoth desperately straining to prove his masculinity and cling to his long-lost youth. Today, however, up close and personal, she didn’t think his antics were the least bit funny, and shuddered as she punched the automatic door lock and started the engine.

Backing from the driveway, the shaken woman cranked the steering wheel and turned tail from the cul-de-sac. Once the Escort was out of sight, Al let his gut fall back into place and sauntered around back to the garbage bin to deposit his flattened aluminum relic. Lifting the lid, he glanced nervously about. Not a soul in sight. Tugging at the plastic ties of the recently deposited trash bag, he pawed through its contents. The deed took all of 15 seconds, whereupon he dropped the lid, having retrieved an unopened envelope from the top of the bag. This was his second such find in the neighbors’ trash—a credit application that could bring \$200 by the afternoon, easy beer money for the weekend to come.

Mitch strolled from the testing center, confident he’d aced his last exam. After the other body shop students had finished gawking over the GTO, he gathered up his tools and loaded them in the trunk. Half an hour later, he parked in front of Mike’s Body Shop and went inside.

Mike Hutchings was perched on a battered old stool in the cozy four-bay shop, working on the rear quarter-panel of a red Ferrari. A small, stooped man in his mid-thirties, Mike sported a grotesque, oversized nose that flattened out at the tip as if the cartilage were missing. Pockmarks documented a severe case of acne suffered in his youth. Together

with his long, greasy hair parted just above his right ear and combed up and over his otherwise shiny pate, the mechanic could well have been mistaken for the original Hunchback of Notre Dame. He'd been married once, but his wife soon grew tired of his relentless addiction to hunting. He kept three stuffed deer mounts on his tiny office wall together with dozens of photos as proof of his hunting prowess. Having recently moved from Utah, Mike had been in business two months in the new shop. His living quarters still consisted of a camping trailer out back. He had to relocate because his father owned the only body shop in their small town and there wasn't enough work to support them both. He figured that maybe it was for the best. Perhaps he could make something big of himself in Vegas.

Business was booming the first few weeks after Mike opened his doors. Offering big bucks, he'd hired away the lead painter from one of his competitors. The man, Jimmy, was little more than a talented drunk and meth dealer with a big mouth, who brought lots of work to Mike's shop from his previous employer. But—wouldn't you know it—two weeks later he'd disappeared and the work dried up. Then two weeks after that, someone on a four-wheeler had stumbled across what was left of Jimmy, a bullet through the back of his skull, body parts scattered across the desert by the vultures and coyotes. The local papers had reported no apparent motive to the execution-style, hit-type murder.

One day soon after Jimmy's demise, Bino had lined Mike and Mitch up when they both happened by the station. He had introduced Mitch as the best auto body man in the state. Mike was understandably a bit hesitant to have another kid work for him, but decided to let him start on a trial basis. On the first job, Mitch had proved himself a better hand than Mike. He always seemed to finish the work Mike would start so it would be done right. They both knew it was Mitch's talent, not Mike's, that brought in the work.

Mitch approached from behind, keeping his distance as Mike's powerful arms, holding a grinder, stripped the paint from the metal fender around two holes in the side of the exotic auto. Sparks flew everywhere, dancing and pirouetting on the floor, then burning out as they skidded to a stop on the grimy concrete.

"Hey, Mike!" Mitch yelled out in an attempt to penetrate the grinder's high-pitched whine and Mike's heavy face shield and ear plugs. Finally he resorted to tapping him on the shoulder.

Mike jumped as he released the trigger to the grinder and spun around

to see who was there. “Crud! You scared me half to death,” he shouted, the grinding wheel slowly winding down to a stop. “I didn’t think you’d be in ‘til afternoon.”

“Finished sooner than I expected. Thought I’d fix a few more things on the goat before I show it this afternoon.”

“Actually, I was hoping you could help me finish this job. The owner’s a friend of Bino’s—needs his ride back by two. No questions. Could be a great account.”

Mitch squinted down at the partially-ground panel. It looked as if two bullet holes had penetrated the side. Plus, a chunk of metal was missing from the fancy wheel. “What happened to it?”

“Like I said, no questions. The guy gave me enough cash to pay rent. I ain’t gonna kick a gift horse in the mouth.”

Mitch couldn’t help but grin in amusement; Mike was always botching clichés, or mingling two of them together. It was quite endearing, actually—just part of who the man was. Mitch’s easy expression quickly turned to one of concern. “Can’t you get in trouble?”

“Look, I was trying to get most of it done so when you came you didn’t have to see what I was doing,” Mike half apologized. “If you’re uncomfortable with it, I’ll finish . . .”

“No way. If you’re lucky you might have it done by two tomorrow. I’ll take care of it. You go pick up the paint.”

Mike set out for the supply store in his light brown Chevy 4x4 pickup, leaving Mitch to his work. Mitch quickly changed his clothes and slid into the low bucket seat of the expensive late-model import. He’d never owned anything but old rebuilds, and only dreamed of such a stylish ride. Strange—the seat had a lump that was poking him in the small of the back. He wiggled side to side, then climbed out and tried to press the seat’s padding back in place under the black leather. No luck.

Mitch’s drive for perfection compelled him to tip the high bucket seat forward and see if he could find access into the upholstery. Locating an open seam and reaching inside, he encountered a hard lump, which he pulled at until it tore loose. Dropping the object in his shirt pocket, a few more minutes’ work of smoothing the padding produced the desired effect. After refastening the base of the upholstery, he settled back in the seat to assure its comfort. It fit his body like a well-worn pair of faded jeans.

Mitch extracted the offending object from his pocket and began picking the melted foam padding off from its smooth surface. Suddenly he realized what it was he was holding: a bullet.

He climbed out again and examined the interior to see how it could have lodged in the seat, soon pinpointing a small hole that corresponded with one in the exterior. Then, leaning across the bucket seat, he found another point of penetration near the back corner, where it had entered through the leather. He dropped the bullet in his pants pocket as a novelty, deciding maybe he should have left things alone, minded his own business.

FOUR

STEPHANIE PULLED HER CAR into a space on the outskirts of the lot before she made her way to First Capital Mortgage's four-story building. She worked in an office on the second floor in the center of the building, processing employment verifications. The spacious room housed 40 cubicles, normally manned by 40 employees, mostly women. But she worked the late shift along with six other women, processing verifications received mostly from the west coast and Hawaii.

The moment Stephanie stepped from the elevator, still tightly clutching the sonogram images in her fingers, she could hear the wave of chatter coming from down the hall.

Maggie Champion, Stephanie's best friend, occupied a cubicle across the narrow hallway in the close quarters of the office, whose stark interior didn't offer a single window view. A 62-year-old mother of four daughters and grandma of twelve, Maggie was a widow of five years. Her husband Richard had worked as a music teacher at one of the city's high schools and had also served as a local ecclesiastical leader. He'd died in October after falling asleep at the wheel driving home from a religious conference in Salt Lake. Maggie would have been with him had she not been tending three of her grandchildren while their parents were away on a business trip.

Maggie was a devout, god-fearing woman, full of love and compassion, who played the organ for her church's congregation. Her tall, slender features and graying hair lent her soft, square face an inviting countenance of wisdom. Stephanie looked to her as a caring friend and couldn't wait to clock in, find Maggie, and share with her the wonderful news.

She found Maggie's cubicle empty, her computer off. How strange—her co-worker usually arrived several minutes earlier than Stephanie.

"Kirsten." She craned her neck to peer over the back wall of her work

space, where the woman had just hung up from a call. “Did Maggie call in?”

Linda, a workaholic whose life-goal was to climb the corporate ladder of success as quickly as her skinny legs could take her—but was still stuck on the team leader rung—looked up with her tired, tarantula eyes. “She called in a few minutes ago. Her grandson fell against the bed or something and needs stitches. She’s tending her daughter’s baby while they go to the doctor.”

Upon hearing the news, Stephanie sunk in her seat and hunkered down to her work.

Al Kostecki slithered from his matted easy chair, in the process knocking two beer cans from the armrest to the floor. The rolling, near-empty cans trickled dime-size puddles of foamy fluid on the soiled carpet. He’d just finished watching his favorite morning soap—and downed his last beer. His youngest son, Andy, stumbled up the stairs from his basement bedroom in his leopard-print bikini underwear, opened the refrigerator door and stood staring blankly into the barren, bright-lit box, leisurely scratching at the skin just beneath his waistband. Truly a chip off the old block.

His mother had stopped buying groceries long ago, the day after she started eating her two square meals at the casino. The menfolk would have to fend for themselves, since her check barely covered the rent, utilities, car payment and insurance.

“You drank my beer,” Andy muttered.

“I put it back dis afternoon. I got mail.” Al’s eyes lit up and a sinister smirk creased his mouth.

Andy slammed the fridge and spun around on his heels. “You lucky *sobakc!*” he said in his father’s native tongue. “Whose is it?”

“Dat stupid kid nex door.” Al flipped open the Hustler magazine he held to expose the credit card application jammed inside the centerfold. “I get bonus on dis von. De got preliminary vork all done.” Andy’s eyes rolled up into his head. “But he ain’t so stupid. He’s got the finest lookin’ woman I ever seen. Mmm, mmm, them long legs that go all the way up to her . . .”

“Her what?” Andy’s revelry was stopped in mid revel. Joan stomped into the room wearing a dingy robe, having already shed her makeup and wig. “You good-for-nothing trash are all the same!” she barked. “Can’t look at a woman without your filthy little minds undressing ‘em, can

ya?” She filled the coffee-pot and set it on the burner. A cough—more like a long, scratchy hack—exploded from the back of her throat.

“Don’t got dat problem vit you no more.” Al refolded his magazine, jammed it in his back pocket, snatched up the car keys from atop the table and headed for the kitchen door.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” snapped his wife, her stubby fingers curling around the handle of a dirty coffee mug sitting on the counter top.

Al closed the rickety screen door between them. “Don’t vant ya take noting off dat anymore,” he laughed, glancing up and down her stout body. He knew what his cruel remark would bring, and nimbly stepped from firing range.

Joan’s mouth spewed vulgarities as the projectile concurrently passed through the torn screen and shattered into a hundred pieces across the crumbling concrete driveway. “And you better have my car back by 5:30, you . . .”

Al rolled up the window on the old Cadillac El Dorado and sped off to burn some of his wife’s hard-earned gasoline. He’d heard the same broken record a thousand times over. It was time to make some money.

In the meantime, Andy, unruffled in the least, had ambled from the kitchen to the bathroom, relieved himself, the door wide open, as his mother wound down and returned to her coffee-pot. He in turn meandered back into the kitchen, still scrupulously at the task of rearranging himself inside his tight underwear.

“Morning,” he muttered.

“You looking for a job today?”

“Sure, Ma, like always.” They sat opposite one another, the rickety metal table between them, awaiting their brew. Joan had tried to kick the lazy bunch from her home several times over the years. All had been in vain.

Maggie clocked in at 11:30 and made a beeline for her desk. The seven team leaders from the office were at their Thursday morning “Coaches’ Corner”, the company’s weekly pep talk. One of the big boys from the Chicago home office had flown in for the rally; the hotshot would already be halfway through his presentation by now.

The firm that had designed the new office sports pep talk was being paid serious money for the company’s morale boost. What’s more, it was being

credited with the office's increased sales, much to the workers' outrage. The average employee didn't care much for the game. The women joked amongst themselves that maybe the big shots truly didn't know the real cause for the upturn: clearly, lower interest rates were driving the increased market share.

Maggie flipped on her computer, carefully nestled the attached headset over her delicately curled hairdo, and fit the earpieces snugly over her ears, smiling over at the glowing mother-to-be. Stephanie squirmed as she hurried to terminate her current call.

"Well, when are you due?" Maggie whispered as she scooted her chair across the hall into Stephanie's workstation. Tears began to well up in Stephanie's eyes, a not uncommon occurrence since the pregnancy began. "What's the matter, dear?" Maggie consoled. She reached out and put her arm around her young friend, suddenly worried something might be wrong.

"N-nothing," stuttered Stephanie, the tears spilling down her face as she folded back the images of her babies and laid them on her desk. "I don't even know . . . w-why I'm crying."

The older woman gently stroked her friend's back. A co-worker in the adjacent booth poked her head over the divider to see what was going on.

"I'm having twins!" Stephanie blurted out—shattering in an instant all office decorum.

Within three minutes at least 30 women from the Employment Verification Team were jammed into the hallway near Stephanie's cubicle, peeking over the dividers to catch a glimpse of the dark sonogram images and congratulating the expectant mother.

Meanwhile, a string of corporate suits followed Linda and the other six team leaders off the elevator and down the corridor leading to Employment Verification. The team leaders, having received such high praise for netting the best stats in the country, were anxious to introduce their staff to the visiting corporate dignitary—and his companion, the man who gleefully claimed all the credit.

A swell of chatter, plainly heard in the hall, was replaced by laughter and the boisterous expressions of women, sharing stories of their own pregnancies. Then, at once, a hush fell over the room. It was like some all-powerful being had suddenly reached down and draped a heavy tarp over the dividers. The throng of embarrassed woman, realizing they

were being stared at by ten professional-looking men clad in fine business suits and their best ties, evaporated, each woman fleeing to the safety of her own desk.

Mike stepped from his pickup and locked the door. The parking lot of the Federal Building was largely deserted. Still, Mike was anxious. His face swivelled side to side, his deep-set eyes scanning the urban horizon. It appeared he hadn't been followed. Technically, the assignment was finished. The phones had been disconnected and the moving rig was scheduled to pack up the rented shop gear the following day. Now off duty, he had been reassigned to the Utah office. After flashing his badge at the security guards, he marched straight into the Las Vegas office of the FBI.

"Agent Hale, you packed?" asked the suit-and-tied agent at the front desk.

"Maybe not. . . . Is Barnes in?"

"I think he's just getting ready to leave for lunch. Go on back."

Mike started down the hall toward the rear when Agent Shane Barnes stepped from his office to pull his door shut. Barnes was a real "suit," part of the new generation of agents hired by the Federal government. It seemed almost every new recruit had a degree as either an accountant or an attorney. The days of hiring a good cop from the city force were long gone. For the few job openings in the agency, there were thousands of applicants. They could discriminate by hiring only the cream of the crop, and they knew it.

Anyone could see that Mike and Agent Barnes were polar opposites. Barnes, with his manicured nails, styled hair and straight, chalk-white teeth, looked good in a suit. He was a natural in dealing with white-collar criminals. Mike, on the other hand, preferred the streets. Guns were his weapon of choice. The only things Agent Barnes had ever blown away were a few cases of clay pigeons at his father's country club back east. He took special delight in mocking his much less polished fellow agent for his love of hunting.

"We need to talk," Mike insisted.

"Hale, I thought you'd have that hunting trailer of yours hooked up to your 4-wheel-drive pickup and be halfway back to Utah by now," sneered Agent Barnes.

"Cut the crap, Barnes. I think we're back in business."

Barnes shook his head. "I know you'd love to stay and keep playing with the cars, but the plug's been pulled. The case is being shelved."

"Well, you'd better dust it off." Mike took a small plastic bag from his pocket and thrust it toward his pompous colleague. "Vincent Domenico dropped his Ferrari off this morning for a rush repair. I pried this from the trunk hinge. Didn't take time to find the second one." He dropped the bag containing a contorted, small-caliber slug into Barnes' outstretched hand. "I'd say we'd better open shop again."

Barnes' face drew tight. "I'll notify the SAC (Special Agent in Charge). You get back to work."

"I've got the kid on it. Not a chance I could get it right in time."

"Has he got anything to do with Domenico?"

"No way. The kid's a good guy—practically refused to work on the car. We'll need to be careful he doesn't get sucked into this thing on entrapment."

Barnes frowned. "Good kids don't steal beer at gunpoint, hang out with punks like Bino Daniels, or drive cars with illegal plates. Matter of fact, now that I think of it, Mitch fits the description of a possible armed robbery suspect Vegas police took a report on last night. If they had a clue where the victim was, we'd help them bring Mitch in for questioning."

"Listen, this kid's no criminal."

"Doesn't he drive a red Camaro?"

"Sometimes. Why?"

"Your boy's got problems. He got off with a wallet last night, at gunpoint. Seems he was chasing the guy across the railroad tracks and just about got him killed."

Mike didn't believe Mitch could be guilty of anything but trying to help. "We need him if we're going to keep Vincent Domenico happy. Let's bring the kid in so we can get this thing straight and put him on the payroll."

"No, you keep the ball rolling. I'll talk to Vegas PD and tell them we got a possible. We'll keep a close eye on him. Maybe they'll keep their distance while we play it out. If the kid's dirty, we'll let him hang himself."

FIVE

AL DROVE HIS WIFE'S El Dorado down the Strip in the old part of town, turned right on Carson toward the tracks, then pulled into the alley between Eddie's Gym and Kitty's Escort Service. He looked past the triple-x video store to the line of winos hunched on a wooden bench, waiting to give plasma at the American Biomedical Center and pick up their 15 bucks. Most of them were regulars, guys who gave three times a week. Al, too, had given a few times—when he was desperate—but couldn't stand the needles. The bums hung around town until the desert temperatures climbed into the 90s, then fled northward by hopping a slow-moving train.

The high brick walls that ran up each side of the alley between the two buildings were plastered with posters of half-naked women in seductive poses, promising anything and everything a man could desire “in the way of exotic dancing”. Food wrappers and crumpled newspaper pages cluttered the base of each wall. These drifted about in the stagnant air as the car passed. Several stinking dumpsters languished at the far end of the alley, waiting to be emptied.

Al pulled up to a metal door behind the Three Queens Casino's parking structure. Enough flecks of white and gold paint clung to the brick wall to make out the name: *Eddie's Gym*. The owner's beat-up '55 Ford pickup rested in its usual oil-stained parking spot, the same place it had been parked every day for over 35 years.

The smell of Chinese food, mingled with automotive paint fumes, lingered in the greasy smoke that drifted from the rear of the building. The burly man climbed the steps and banged hard on the metal door. Looking to the west, he spotted a filthy woman with matted gray hair. She paused briefly from scrounging in the dumpster and stared up at him.

“Vut you looking at?” Al growled, prompting the woman to step from atop a plastic milk crate, place it in her battered shopping cart

and scurry away, the cart's rattling wheels echoing down the alleyway. When he turned back, the heavy metal door opened and a black man named Ty, with the build of a rhinoceros, filled the void where the door had hung. Al squeezed by the enormous mass of a man, all the while ignoring Ty's blasphemous objections to folks who used the rear entrance. Then the door clanked shut behind them both.

Inside, the men lumbered down the darkened corridor. Neither seemed to notice the repugnant odors that had struggled to flee the building through the briefly yawning door. At the end of the corridor Ty stopped in front of another metal door and folded his arms across his hairless chest, while Al proceeded through a room full of men, grunting, lifting heavy weights and admiring their sleeveless or shirtless rippled bodies in the mirrored west wall.

Toward the rear of the room was a roped off ring, slightly elevated above the floor, upon which two men vied to beat each other's brains out. A wizened old man in a white tank top, his hair flecked mostly gray, slouched on a nearby stool, sluggishly swinging his clenched fists in the air. The loose folds of skin of his arms flopped about as he shouted out instructions.

Al approached the old man and hollered, "Goot day, Eddie!"

Eddie Alders, eyebrows raised, turned his lean body to see who it was that had broken through his cloud of concentration. The puffy slits above his eyes lifted enough for Al to see his dark pupils. Eddie smiled a thin, puckered grin. The curled-up waxed ends of his gray moustache folded back toward his swollen cheeks as he cupped his gnarled hand to his ear.

"Wha'dya say?" Then, as if by instinct, he swivelled back around to shout another string of instructions at the sweaty pair of fighters.

Al gave him a slap on the back and made his way to the stairs leading up to the ring.

An upper-floor balcony ran the length of each of the room's four walls. From his corner roost, elbows on mahogany desk pushed against the glass overlooking the gym, sat Clint, Eddie's grandson. The young man glanced up from his phone call, penetrating green eyes impatiently signaling to Al to wait in the hall until he finished. The veins bulged in Clint's sculpted arms, meat hooks that stretched the sleeves of his white polo shirt as he leaned over and pushed the door to his office closed. Then he flicked at the dark mop of gelled hair that cas-

caded down onto his brow, a nervous habit he'd had since he was a boy.

His business finished, Clint rose and opened the office door and motioned for Al to come up, cursing the lazy Russian for not using the regular channels of delivery.

Al erupted in a laugh. He had known Clint when he was still stealing candy bars from the corner market; that was before he'd been retained to sell steroids to his grandpa's gym-rat boxers. Now he felt the urge to remind the younger man of his humble beginnings. Clint, stung by the rebuke, immediately turned quiet, his lip drawn down into a sullen pout. Sensing that he at last had been accorded proper respect, Al cunningly added, "I got mail." With that he withdrew Mitch's credit application from his centerfold and tossed in on the desk.

Envelope in hand, Clint swivelled on his chair and dropped the application in a mail chute. The two men sat in silence, waiting. Clint tugged nervously at the stubbly sideburns that extended to the bottom of his ear, his eyes darting about on the screen of his computer monitor. Meanwhile, Al snapped his dirty magazine open to "read." The phone would ring in its own good time.

Clint was an only grandchild. Eddie once bragged that his grandson could be a middleweight champion like he had been. But the "boy," now 28, had proved a disappointment, both in the ring and in life. Eddie blamed himself—as well as his over-indulgent daughter—for Clint's failures. The boy, however, had finally started to make something of himself, running a successful *telemarketing* business from his basement.

It had all begun a year earlier when the new landlord from New Jersey purchased their building, along with the rest of the city block. Eddie had received an eviction notice, together with 24 other tenants. In an attempt to fight back, they'd formed an alliance to convince the new owners not to demolish the properties, but instead to help revitalize the neighborhood. After a sufficient amount of groveling, the mysterious corporation had sent a representative around, Vincent Domenico.

Using his considerable "people skills," Vincent had agreed to allow the tenants to stay on a trial basis, if they agreed to let him evaluate their business practices to see if they could afford an increase in rent. Straightway, seven of the 24 owners sold out to Vincent and moved on. The remaining companies seemed to prosper under the new arrange-

ment. It was about that time that Clint had decided to get involved in his aging grandfather's business. It was he who now ran the entire gym operation. Over the ensuing months, Eddie had seemed to go down hill, almost completely losing his hearing.

When the phone rang, Clint pounced on it like a hunger-crazed badger, snapping up the receiver and cramming it up to his ear. Then, without saying a word, he dropped it back into its receiver. "Looks like you get the bonus on this one." He leaned back in his chair and wrestled a loose roll of cash from his front pants pocket. "This Mitch guy won't be good again. Find someone new, and, remember, next time use the proper channels."

Al nodded and hauled himself to his feet. "Looks like you needs bigger pants," he chuckled as Clint peeled off two crisp hundred-dollar bills. He reached out as if to hand them to Al, then flung them across the desk. The bills drifted to the floor. Al grunted as he shot an odious gaze at the pretty-faced boy and bent to collect his reward. Al had enough respect for Eddie that he didn't bother to say what he was thinking to his punk of a grandson. He gathered his money and headed for the door.

"I'm not kidding, Al. If you don't use proper channels, you won't get a dime next time."

Al mumbled a few rough Russian words as he made for the stairs. Reaching the last squeaky step, he entered the gym. Al noticed Eddie take his log and weight book from his hip pocket, bite at the short pencil he kept behind his ear, and scratch out some notes, a task he'd performed thousands of times before.

Mitch, after taking a moment to admire his flawless work on the Ferrari, pulled his GTO into the empty bay of Mike's shop. Just a few more minor details to attend to. Mike had seemed pleased with the bullet-riddled car's quality and time of completion, and offered to give Mitch a hand.

Just then a late-model Corvette convertible purred up to the open bay doors. Two men in their late twenties stepped from the low-profile car. Mitch noticed the passenger first, clad in a silk suit and designer sunglasses. A heavy gold chain hung around his neck. His shirt was unbuttoned to mid-chest, as if to purposely show off the blinding piece of jewelry. The man's face seemed as hard and cold as marble. He

paused to eye the joint, ran his fingers through his dark hair, and stepped toward the red Ferrari in the first bay.

Guessing the guy must be the owner of the car, Mitch, noting the classic gangster stereotype, chuckled under his breath. His recollection of the bullet in his pants pocket, though, kept the big smile—anxious to escape—under wraps.

The man drew the shades from his face as Mike approached. The owner's emotionless black eyes, didn't really seem to belong to the mouth, which had broken into a shallow smile. "The cah looks as good as new," he chortled in his thick Jersey accent.

Mitch's gaze shifted to take in the Vette's driver, who sported a white polo shirt with the words *Eddie's Gym* stitched across his bulging chest. He flicked a few strands of styled hair from his eyes and followed the first man into the garage. Mitch climbed from the back seat of the GTO.

Mike shook hands with the first man, then turned to introduce his co-worker. "This is Mitch Wilson. He's the talent behind the job."

The owner of the car stuck his hand out and took Mitch's in a clenching grip. "Vincent Domenico—my friends call me Vinnie. This is Clint Thurston, an associate."

Mitch nodded.

"I've heard a lot about you," Vinnie continued. "Bino says you're the best in the state."

Mitch shuffled awkwardly. The spotlight didn't really suit him. "I learned from the best," he replied, referring to his grandfather.

"This your cah?" Vinnie nodded his head as he wandered around the back of the Ferrari to peer through the open door into the immaculate GTO.

"It is."

"You did a helluva job. They sure don't make 'em like this anymore." Vinnie looked over at Clint; it was a look an older brother reserves for a kid sister. Eddie's muscle-bound punk of a grandson wasn't much of a car enthusiast. "Take off Clint! They've got my ride finished. I'll catch you later."

Clint nodded, put his sunglasses back on and retreated to his expensive auto without saying a word. Mike made a mental note of the Vette's license plate number as it pulled from the parking lot.

Vinnie continued to admire Mitch's GTO. "You running three deuces

and a big block?"

Clearly the guy knew cars. Mitch popped the hood.

Vinnie's eyes lit up at sight of the engine. "This baby ought'a move."

"It probably wouldn't hold a candle to yours in the quarter-mile—the top end's flat at about one-twenty. What does the Ferrari do?"

Vinnie's chin protruded in thought and he nodded his head in a cocky gesture. "With the modifications . . . she'll get to about 220. Want to take it for a spin?"

"No way! Are you serious?" Mitch glanced over at Mike, who stood listening, pondering whether to warn the kid who it was he was dealing with.

"Hop in. We'll catch 15 northbound at Cheyenne. You can open her up outside of town and see how she feels. I've got the best radar detection money can buy, and if the traffic's light you might be able to hit 180—that is, if you got the *cojones*."

Mitch couldn't help but bust out in his little-kid grin; this was like living a dream. He'd pressed a few of his cars on the same strip of freeway on the way to grandpa's, but the fastest he'd ever gone was 120 mph. Mike tried to catch Mitch's eye to stop him, but he was too caught up in the moment. Both he and Vinnie climbed in the car and veered out onto the highway.

Mike went back around to his trailer, pulled a cell phone from under a kitchen drawer, and punched in a number. "He's after the kid."

Agent Barnes' sarcasm had not tapered off in the least. "Is this the same good kid you practically had to force to work on the bullet holes?"

"I'm telling you, let's bring the kid in and put him on the payroll. It'll save us all a lot of trouble."

"Just keep an eye on him for now and stay in touch. If things start moving, we'll bring in back-up and get you some listening equipment."

Mitch nestled into the Ferrari's black leather driver's seat. It felt like he was barely creeping along as he traveled northbound past the modest flow of traffic. The radar detector warned of a potential problem looming ahead. After dropping down to a legal speed, they passed the highway patrolman waiting under the overpass at Craig Road. His head turned to watch the sporty red car pass. A mile more down the road, Vinnie asked why Mitch didn't turn it loose.

"I've been wondering the same thing." Mitch slammed the shifter into third. Then he pressed the gas pedal to the floor and popped the clutch. Even at 70 mph, the tires squealed. Both men were pressed back tightly against their seats as the rush of acceleration flowed through their veins.

Mitch hit fourth gear doing 110; fifth gear at 145. The car still had power to burn as he wove in and out of traffic—past cars and trucks that seemed to be standing still. The car handled unlike anything he'd ever driven. Vinnie seemed unaffected by the mounting speed, but Mitch's mind was reeling.

"My wife'd kill me if she knew what I was doing," he exclaimed over the high-pitched whine of the performance engine, now in high gear.

"It's good to see you're your own man."

Somewhere between 160 and 180, Mitch sensed a twinge of doubt tug at his mind. The image of his twins flashed before him—at almost the same instant the beep of the radar detector warned of trouble.

"Hit the brakes," Vinnie shouted, "and pull to the shoulder." Both men lurched forward as the anti-lock brakes nearly stood the car on its nose. Within 20 seconds they were parked on the side of the freeway to await the oncoming patrol car.

Vinnie settled back in his seat, one hand resting on the car's molded dash, the other lightly massaging the back of his neck. "If you're lucky, he didn't get a lock and the scrambler will screw up his readings."

Soon a patrol car came into view from up the highway, slowed when its driver spotted the idling Ferrari, and crossed the median in a cloud of dust. Before the officer had climbed from his vehicle, a second patrol car pulled up behind him, its lights still flashing.

"Don't worry, they haven't got enough to make anything stick." Vinnie opened the passenger door and started to exit the car. Mitch, meanwhile, stayed put. The thought of losing his driver's license churned through his head.

"Get back in the vehicle," ordered the approaching patrolman.

"What seems to be the problem, officer?" Vinnie innocently asked, standing his ground, one hand poised atop the vehicle's shapely fender.

The officer's right hand rested flat against his holstered gun. "I said get back in the vehicle," he repeated. The second officer cautiously advanced from the passenger side of the first patrol car as Vinnie slowly turned and slid back into his seat.

The first officer sidled up to the car. "Put your hands where I can see them." Mitch swallowed hard. Suddenly the plush bucket seat didn't

seem so comfortable anymore. He willed his clammy hands onto the steering wheel. Vinnie, on the other hand, acted nonchalant. He seemed to relish the confrontation.

"I'm going to need your driver's licenses and the car's registration." The officer was now positioned behind the driver's door out of range of vision. Mitch reached down and removed his wallet. Vinnie took the registration from the glove box and passed it and his license to Mitch. The officer cautiously took the documents. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"He wasn't driving, officer, I was," Vinnie broke in. "We just pulled over so he could take a turn behind the wheel."

Mitch's head swivelled sideways. Vinnie, wearing a corrugated half-grin, was taking the rap. The officer stepped to the rear of the vehicle and motioned the second officer to his side.

"What are you doing?" Mitch muttered under his breath.

"Keeping you out of jail for reckless driving. Don't tell them anything."

After a minute's time, the first officer returned to the window. "Mr. Wilson, could you step back to my vehicle?"

Mitch extracted himself from the Ferrari, made his way to the patrol car, and sank into its cluttered passenger seat. The officer typed Mitch's driver's license number into his onboard computer and waited for a response. Mitch shifted uneasily, thinking back to the incident the night before with Greg Hart. He hoped no one had given his description to the police.

The officer reached up and pushed a button on the back of his radar gun. "That's how fast you were going." The display read 179. Mitch remained silent. The officer picked up the radio. "Two-twelve . . . did you get that description?"

"Negative . . . both callers said they were traveling too fast."

The officer turned back to Mitch. "You've got a clean record, Mr. Wilson, but it appears your friend isn't such a good citizen. I wouldn't hesitate to throw you both in jail for that little stunt if I had enough proof to do it." Mitch looked up in surprise. "Next time you won't be so lucky. You're either going to kill someone or I'll catch you again and take you in. I'm going to write you a warning to make sure I remember who you are."

Mitch waited for the paperwork, half apologized to the officer for

his trouble, then returned to the Ferrari, where Vinnie, now in the driver's seat, coolly waited.

"What'd I tell ya, kid? He couldn't write you up, could he?"

"No, but he knew I was driving."

"*Knowing* and *proving* are two very different things," Vinnie boasted. "You got big ones, kid, big ones; I like that. Bino told me you got potential." He pulled from the shoulder of the road. "I didn't think anyone could get this car looking like new so fast. . . . It's yours if you come to work for me."

Mitch was sure his ears had gone haywire or something. "What?"

"I could never drive a cah that's been repaired, even if it does look like new. I'll pay you six grand a month and enough under the table bonuses that you won't know what to do with all the cash. Whatta you say?"

Vinnie exited the freeway, circled under the overpass and started back to town. Mitch, his stomach still tied up in knots, could hardly speak. "What . . ." he stammered, "kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a businessman—a financial advisor to several business interests. I need a partner in a body shop I bought a few months back 'cause my last manager quit. Matter of fact, your boss stole him from me along with some of my best customers. I figure I wasn't paying him enough to keep him happy. It's so hard to find good help these days."

"Look, Mr. Domenico—"

"Call me Vinnie. . . ." The car's compact, insulated interior took on a momentary, eerie silence.

"Mr. Domenico . . . Vinnie, I mean . . . Mike's my friend, and I don't know anything about you. I'm planning on going back to school in the fall. I don't think I'm the right man for the job. . . ." Mitch noticed the muscles tighten in Vinnie's jaw and temple.

"Just think it over a few days. Bino tells me Mike's had a rough start. Maybe I've got room for the both of you. . . . I'll get back to you—just give it some thought."

Mitch's muddled brain was riveted on the bullet in his pocket. He didn't need to think it over. The answer would be the same no matter how much he was offered. It was just too good to be . . . well, *good*.

SIX

GREG HART OPENED HIS EYES and tried to focus on the face of the person standing above him, yelling obscenities and demanding he get off the railroad property before the police were called. His head was spinning and his mind reeled, consciousness seeping too slowly back into his brain. It was becoming more and more clear what had happened. Gradually, the reality of his miserable life was becoming knife-sharp, bleak, transparent.

The smell of urine and sun-baked vomit filled the air, joined by the sound of buzzing flies. Together they bespoke the nightmarish, nauseous hours he had spent on the hard ground. Although much of it was a blur, his aching stomach muscles told him he'd suffered a constant bout of dry-heaves from alcohol poisoning.

Out of habit, the pathetic-looking creature glanced at his wrist to check the time. A layer of crusty bile covered his arm where a watch had been strapped. His designer shirt, pants, shoes and socks were gone. He eased himself into a sitting position, wincing at the pain of the fiery sunburn covering the right half of his mostly naked body.

"Get out of here, you no good stinkin' drunk!" the railroad worker started in again. "Get your clothes on and get outta here." With that, he kicked at Greg a heap of filthy clothes that blanketed a pair of scuffed shoes. "I've got enough to do without worryin' you bums are gonna wander on to the track of a movin' train."

Greg scraped the clothes into a pile with his fingers and tottered to his feet. Over the top of a row of empty boxcars he could see some distant dilapidated buildings, and headed out in their direction.

"The other way!" squawked the man. "You hafta go around 40 cars that way."

Greg reversed direction and lifted a hand to shade his face from the pounding sun. The smelly rags in his arms shifted and a shoe fell unnoticed to the ground. Greg trudged on toward the end of the cars.

The few people in the greyhound station tried not to stare as the outlandish figure, wearing only his underwear, stumbled across the complex and made his way to the restroom. Dropping the filthy pile of clothes on the floor, he grasped both sides of the soiled sink and lifted his gaze. The mirror didn't lie. Greg had thought he was at a low the day before; now he could hardly believe the sight that reflected back at him. He raked his hair from his face and fingered the sunburned skin that was swelling his right eye almost shut.

The gurgle of a flushing toilet was heard. A young man, yet in the act of zipping up his pants, stepped from the far stall. Looking up, he sniffed and wiped a fingerless glove under his nose. "Wow dude, you okay?" he asked. "Maybe I should get you an ambulance or something."

As far as Greg was concerned, the kid was a punk—a real freak. Stud-ded jacket, purplish spiked hair, multiple piercings. . . . A worthless punk.

Through his swollen tongue, Greg could hardly spit out the words. "I'm fine."

"Yeah, and I'm George W. Bush," the kid snickered. "You look worse than my old man after a week off the wagon."

"I'm fine," he repeated as he turned on the water.

"'Fine' people don't crap their pants and wander around in public in their boxers. Come on, let me give you a hand."

Greg cupped his hands under the flow and raised the cool, heavenly liquid to his face. Still queasy, the blood that rushed to his bent head brought him to his knees. As he fell, his chin struck the sink. A sickening, hollow thud echoed throughout the tiled bathroom. A pair of hands caught hold of him, bearing him to the floor. His hazy vision caught sight of the purple-haired kid above him, his dark features silhouetted against the fluorescent ceiling light.

"You hold on while I go call an ambulance." He started for the door.

"No! Just give me a hand. Please!"

The young man hesitated, then retraced his steps. "What the heck, dude. . . . I got two hours to burn and you've probably got one wild story."

Eddie cut the tape from the wrists of his most promising young brawler and cuffed him on the back of the head. The old man's voice was sharp and gruff. "You're doin' fine, boy. Get that left hook down, maybe we'll see you in the square. Go cool down on the walker and hit the showers."

"Thanks, Pops." Luke, all of 14 years old, tucked his fist under his skinny

arm and pulled the glove from his hand. "I've been wondering if I could bring a friend tomorrow. His mama, brothers, sisters, they came to the shelter last night. They was beat up pretty bad. I could be his friend and you could teach him how to defend himself."

Eddie lowered his voice. "I always got room for one more boy. You bring him and his mama with you—we'll suit him up and fit him with a pair of gloves. If he's not using drugs . . . ah, you know the rules."

"I know. He don't look like that kind'a kid."

Eddie took the boy's headgear and tousled his hair. "Now go cool down so you don't cramp up." The boy lit out with a bounce in his step that let Eddie know the he would never again be afraid of his father.

The old man stooped to gather up the clumps of discarded tape from the floor. Clutching them in his fist, he stuffed the sticky debris in the overflowing trash basket. Then he took down a fresh roll of tape from the shelf and made for the back of the building.

Ty still stood guard at the metal door leading to the basement. Eddie shook his head in disgust as he limped down the darkened corridor. "Could'a been a contender," he mumbled in disgust.

The brawny, ebony-skinned man caught what Eddie was saying and lowered his eyes in shame, disappointed, after all these years, at having let the old man down.

The metal door crashing open caught the grizzled woman rifling through the dumpster below off guard. "It's just Eddie," she droned, as if speaking to someone nearby. "I'll bet he's got a roll of tape fer us."

Eddie waited for the door to slam behind him before he set the garbage basket on the steps. He stretched out the stiffness in his back and let his leg and arm joints unfold in the rays of sunshine that angled between the walled alleyway. Retrieving the trash, he performed a step-hop off the landing, bounced down the remaining steps, and did a quick-step shuffle with his feet while tossing his head to each side, dodging imaginary blows. Although his moves were somewhat rusty, for a bent old man he could still dance around pretty good.

"I see ya still be pretendin', you old codger."

Eddie smiled a kindly smile. "And you're still diggin' in my dumpster, buttin' into others' business."

The old woman broke into a toothless grin, causing waves of wrinkled, weathered skin to buckle in its wake.

“How’s Cap’n?”

“Moved his shack from the Rio 95 bridge to I-15. Says there’s less noise there. He’s gettin’ more rest.”

“And Ritter’s bunions?”

“Still pretty bad. . . . He’s okay, though.”

Eddie drew the roll of athletic tape from his pocket along with a twenty-dollar bill. “Here’s a roll of tape and a few bucks. Maybe more of that cream will help.”

“God bless you, Eddie.” The old woman pressed the bill close to her face to determine its value.

The bygone fighter unfurled a hanky from his back pocket to wipe his nose. As he did so, the black booklet in which he kept his meticulous notes fell to the ground. He bent to pick it up. “I’m going to need all the blessings I can get if I turn the grandson in. Soon, I’m afraid, I’ll be joining you on the street.”

“Still givin’ you trouble?”

“Thinks he’s some kind’a gangster. They got something going on in the basement behind that locked door. The money’s gotta be dirty.” Eddie paused and turned to the side as though he were greeting an old friend. “And, Belle, how are you today? I wish my grandson was as well behaved as you are for your mother.”

“She’s always been a good girl—never given me a lick ‘a trouble,” the old woman chimed in, nodding in the direction of the empty alleyway. “We’ll be goin’ now. I’ll get some gauze from home and see if I can find Ritter.” The ragged woman climbed down from her milk crate and lifted it into her over-stuffed shopping cart. “Come on, Belle, we got things to do.”

Shuffling, the homeless figure jostled the squeaky cart out of the alley, all alone, mumbling to herself. Eddie reached up and dabbed at his eyes.

SEVEN

WITH THE SUITS FINALLY GONE, Stephanie waited for the axe to fall. Sure enough, Linda came on the intercom and ordered her to the conference room.

On her way, Stephanie pondered what had just happened. When the commanding group of visitors had shown up, the stunned women could do nothing more than slink back to their cubicles, leaving Stephanie alone to take the heat. Incensed, Linda had demanded to know why no one was working. Stephanie, distraught, had stood in an effort to explain, but burst into tears partway through the apology. The visiting dignitary—much to Linda’s chagrin—had come to the aid of the expectant mother, comforting and congratulating her. Then he’d complimented the entire room full of women on their fine work.

Outside the conference room, Stephanie took a deep breath and opened the door. She couldn’t help but notice the rings of sweat that stained the armpits of her team leader’s tan jacket. At last safely behind closed doors, Linda launched into her well-rehearsed tirade. “I thought I could depend on you, *Ms. Wilson*,” she screeched. “You knew we had out-of-town visitors today . . .”

Stephanie stifled any more tears, refusing to give Linda the satisfaction. “I’m sorry . . . it wasn’t my fault. Someone overheard me telling Maggie, and the next thing I knew everyone wanted to see.”

“You made me look like a witch,” Linda scolded, pressing her face toward Stephanie’s while keeping her back to the glass looking out into the main office.

Stephanie bit the inside of her cheek, unable to contain herself. “You didn’t need my help for that,” she blurted out, seething but still managing to hold the tears at bay.

The woman’s face scrunched up in a sour-lemon expression. “You slut! You’re probably the one who’s been filing complaints about me. Well let me tell you something. I’m going to make your life a living

hell the next five months. You'll wish you never worked here, and I guarantee there will be no leniency for your condition." Lecture over, little-lord Linda plastered a smile on her face, swung open the office door, and waited for Stephanie to step out. "I apologize again—and congratulations on the good news!" she said in her best, kindest voice, loud enough for the whole room to hear.

Vinnie dropped Mitch off at Mike's shop, once more inviting the expert body-man to consider his offer. As he pulled away, he rolled his wrist to check the time on his Rolex, then took his cell phone from an inside suit pocket. "Tell me what you found out about this Mitch kid."

Bino's raspy voice came on the other end of the line. Inside his booth, he pressed the phone to his ear. "He was arrested for . . . armed robbery at 17 . . . got a reduced sentence . . . finished probation a couple years ago."

"He's our man. How do we own him?"

"Won't be easy. . . . Doesn't even buy hot merchandise."

"What time did you say he's showing the car?"

"Four."

"Cancel with your buyer. I'm sending someone over."

Vinnie punched in a second number. The friendly front he'd presented to Mitch minutes before had been erased, replaced by a cryptic scowl. "Angelo, call Clint. Get the address of Mitch Wilson—he'll know who it is. . . . Yeah. You've got an appointment at four to pick up a cah at the drop. Stay out of the teller's view."

Back at the gas station, Bino gathered his oxygen cart and opened the sliding glass door to the booth. Janice, his part-time help, was making her way across the worn asphalt from her car, parked near the upright fuel tanks at the back of the lot.

"I'll be back in an hour," Bino called out, winded. "I'm expecting Mitch . . . at four."

"Who's he?" Janice was still trying to pull her hair back into a bun as she spoke. She gave the appearance of a 60-year-old live ventriloquist doll, the way her lower jaw seemed to fit up inside her smiling pudgy cheeks. She worked an occasional hour or two during the days when Bino needed to run an errand, and almost every night and some weekends. Bino always paid her in cash.

"He's the kid . . . with all the old cars."

“Yes, I remember him. Such a nice boy.”

“If I’m not back before he gets here, tell him to let the man take his car while he waits. I trust him.”

Janice sniffed at the stale air outside the booth and cast Bino a suspicious glare. “Okay . . . have you been smoking again?”

“No . . . one of my customers.”

“That’s good. It’s not healthy, you know.”

Janice had been buying her gas at the station since its first pump was turned on some 25 years earlier. The widow lived only a few blocks away and would drop everything and come help out whenever Bino called. She didn’t have much upstairs, but she loved people and would never think to pry into their personal affairs. Living alone, the few extra dollars she made from the station helped stretch the meager social security checks she received each month.

Janice entered the teller booth and opened the rest of the windows. The smell of tobacco was still strong. The place badly needed airing out. She eyed the rear lot as Bino climbed in his car—struggling with his oxygen—then reached down and dumped the overflowing ash tray contents into the garbage can.

Bino turned the motor over. The five-year-old Audi puffed out almost as much smoke as its occupant. He’d often joked that he was going to drive it off a bridge and collect the insurance. Mitch had worked on its engine a time or two, and with a little encouragement probably would have fixed it for him. He said it wasn’t worth fixing the re-built, as he’d totaled the car just a few months after he climbed back on the wagon and his old friend Jimmy had done a horrible job fixing it back up.

Having added the final touches to the GTO, Mitch collected his tools and put them in the trunk. Mike had casually asked him about his drive with Vinnie, but Mitch was reluctant to talk.

Mike, skeptical, tossed out a hook, a query that would tell him everything he needed to know. “You’re welcome to leave your tools here.”

Mitch, ignoring the offer, locked the immaculate tool chest encircled by loose power tools and closed the trunk. “My appointment’s at four. I’ll be back after that; we need to talk.” That said, Mitch backed his car from the open bay and drove away.

Mike scrambled to close up and follow Mitch, worried he might

have taken a job offer from Vinnie. It was the only explanation: why else would he leave four thousand dollars worth of tools in the back of his car when he'd planned on dropping them off after school.

Not a single customer was at the station when Mitch arrived a few minutes before 4:00 pm. He hoped Bino had collected the information on Greg Hart and was ready to decipher the man's failed suicide attempt. Disappointed to find Bino out, Mitch leaned up against the teller window. "Hi, Janice," he said. As she slid open the window the combined odor of potpourri candles and stale ashtray drifted from the small room. "Where's Bino?"

"Well, I expect him any time. He left you a message. Let's see . . . he said if he didn't get back before you got here, to let the buyer take your car for a drive. He trusts him."

Mike yanked the parking brake into place. Positioned in an empty hotel parking lot a half block away, he dislodged a pair of field glasses from under his seat and peered off through a clump of palm trees in the direction of the station. Mike knew Bino had ties to Vincent Domenico, and that's where he had started the undercover investigation, now two months old.

He'd cruised into town in his pickup, camping trailer in tow, with nothing more than a deer rifle hanging in the back window and a fictitious dream of opening a body shop.

Without Bino's help, Mike, putting his plan into action, had hired his first employee, Jimmy, from the city's top competitor—Vinnie Domenico. Jimmy was an exceptional painter, but didn't know enough—or wouldn't say much—about Vinnie's operation. He did manage, however, to steal Vinnie's biggest account, an account that had moved on when Jimmy disappeared. The agency knew stolen cars from Vegas were showing up in various parts around the country. They also were aware that several illegal activities had ceased operating back in New Jersey about the same time Domenico had vacated the state.

Through the glasses, Mike spied a clean cut man in his early 20s park an almost-new Chrysler 300, with dealer plates, alongside the GTO. The only other interruption to the easygoing conversation Mitch and Janice were having was a customer who'd dropped by a brown manila envelope with the word "mail" scribbled across the front. Mitch excused himself and stepped toward his car.

“This must be the car Bino tol’ me ‘bout,” the man said in a Latino accent. “I’m Jose Vasquez. It’s nice, like he tol’ me it would be.” He extended his hand. Gold rings adorned his fingers, manicured appendages attached to a wrist draped in an expensive watch. He was well-dressed, wore a tie, and seemed sincere.

“Mitch Wilson.”

Vasquez pulled a business card from his pocket and handed it to Mitch. At the top was the local Chrysler dealership’s logo, followed by the name Jose Vasquez and the title “Used Car Sales Manager” printed underneath. “I’d like to take it back to the dealership—have one of the mechanics look at it, if you don’ mind.”

Mitch recoiled at the thought.

“If it makes you uncomfortable,” Vasquez continued, “you can come with me. . . . Better yet, I’ll leave the keys to my car here for you.” He tossed the keys to the Chrysler at Mitch. “I’ll be back in a half-hour. If I want to buy it, can you produce the title?”

Mitch reached in his pocket and brought out the keys to the GTO. “It’s free and clear. The title’s at home.”

“Good. If it’s as sound as it looks, we’ll go to the bank.”

“Be careful—I’ve got a lot of work in it.”

“Don’ worry, I’ll treat it like my own.”

A hollow sensation gnawed at the pit of Mitch’s stomach as he watched his prized car pull from the station and head off down the street. Mike followed at a safe distance.

EIGHT

STEPHANIE RETURNED FROM the ladies' room, eyes puffy and swollen, nose red and sniffily. What little makeup she wore was gone. Linda, smiling, stood outside her work station as Stephanie, avoiding eye contact, passed by.

"If you're not feeling well, why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off?" she urged.

Maggie looked on, wondering if a cat fight was about to break out. Stephanie took a few more steps before turning sharply and withdrawing once more to the restroom. Maggie followed. Her friend was suffering from more than the standard hormonal imbalance of pregnancy. Linda grinned smugly to herself as the women fled the office.

Mitch's car glided down the road. Its young driver checked his rear-view mirror for the tenth time. The Chevy pickup was an easy mark, sticking up above traffic even five cars back. Mike was on the phone calling for backup when the GTO suddenly bolted across two lanes and made an illegal left turn onto Bonanza Road. By the time Mike had swerved onto Martin Luther King Boulevard, he had no idea which way the car had gone.

Vasquez sped east on 95, then north on I-15, getting off the freeway at Washington—only blocks from Mitch's house, a residence he'd driven past an hour earlier on his way to Bino's gas station. The Chevy pickup had been the only unexpected surprise. The driver guided the GTO down the lifeless cul-de-sac and pressed the garage door opener, easing in next to the Camaro.

Snapping on a pair of rubber gloves, he exited the car and launched into an organized search, commencing in the garage, replacing every item he disturbed to its original place. There was no hint of hurry. His years of experience in petty larceny and auto theft, combined with the information Clint had given him . . . he'd find what he was looking for,

sooner or later.

The Audi pulled into the station, leaving a foul trail of blue smoke in its wake. Mitch walked over to the car and swung open the passenger door, waiting for the haze of thick cigarette smoke to clear before he dropped into the seat beside Bino. "So what'd you find on Greg Hart?"

"You've got trouble, kid."

"What kind of trouble?"

Bino took a running start, drawing in as much air as his damaged lungs would take. "I just had coffee with . . . a friend of mine . . . an expert in criminal matters. Cost me . . . three bills and . . . a huge marker. She told me . . . the police have a good description . . . and composite drawing . . . of a young man . . . early twenties, blond hair . . . blue or light green eyes . . . between 5' 11" . . . and 6' 4" and . . . weighing about 200 pounds. Says he fled the scene . . . a possible armed robbery . . . in a red Camaro."

Mitch shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. "Oh, boy. . . ."

Bino's lips reached out and sucked in a shallow breath. "The good news is . . . without a victim, even . . . even if they identify you . . . they could never make any . . . charges stick."

"I've got to find the guy."

"Good luck. He's probably . . . hopped a train headed north . . . by now." Bino dropped three folded documents between them on the seat. "The guy's got more . . . financial troubles than you can . . . shake a credit card at."

Mitch stared down at the court documents, one judgment after another, some from lending institutions, most served by credit card companies. "The paperwork wasn't finished," Bino continued, "but the poor guy's house . . . was sold on the steps of . . . the courthouse this morning. The second mortgage . . . bought the first."

Mitch let out a sigh. "I better turn myself in—explain what happened. All I did was save the guy's life. . . ."

"It's up to you, kid . . . but I thought you told me . . . something like this had . . . had happened to you before?"

Mitch didn't recall the conversation, but assumed he must have mentioned something about the burglary conviction during the last

two years.

Bino's bloodshot eyes flitted about the station. "By the way, where's your car?"

"Your buyer took it to his mechanic to have it checked out."

"You let him take it?"

"Sure. He handed me the keys to his Chrysler and a business card. Said he'd be right back."

"How long ago . . . was that?"

Mitch checked his watch. "Twenty minutes."

Maggie stood facing the bathroom mirror with her arm around the shoulder of her younger friend. "It's okay, Stephanie. Let it out. I cried the whole time I was pregnant with my second child. My husband thought something was the matter with me."

"Uh, uh, uh . . ." Stephanie gasped, like a sobbing child who couldn't catch her breath. "It's—it's more than that."

Maggie stepped back, took Stephanie by the hands and gave her a sympathetic nod. "What is it?"

"Linda called me in the office—she, she threatened me."

"I wondered if that was it."

"You believe me?"

"Of course. She did it to me, too, just after I hired on. Bawled me out something awful, several times." A glimmer of hope returned to Stephanie's eyes. Maggie went on. "She told me I was too old to be working, and vowed to make my job miserable. I decided she could try, but I'm the one in charge of how I feel."

"I was afraid no one would believe me . . . because she seems so friendly."

"I would have believed you even if she hadn't done it to me. Now, why don't you go home and get some rest. If she tries anything tomorrow we'll go see her supervisor together." Stephanie blotted at her eyes with a tissue. "I'll call, and see if you still want me to pick you up tonight," Maggie added as an afterthought.

Stephanie looked up in disbelief. How could Maggie even suggest such a thing? "I wouldn't dream of not going. Our visits are the highlight of my week. They give me courage. . . ."

Maggie smiled and nodded as she gently stroked Stephanie's arm. "Isn't it a miracle how, when we give, we get so much in return?"

Stephanie rested her head on Maggie's shoulder. The love and kindness radiating from her friend was such a comfort. No longer able to contain them, the remaining tears suddenly burst from their reservoir. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she wailed. "Why couldn't I have been *your* daughter?"

"You are, Stephanie, you are." Maggie's loving reassurance was a far cry from the angry words last spoken by her own parents when they refused to attend hers and Mitch's wedding.

The GTO's driver, a pro, who's real name was Angelo Quintano, slid behind the passenger seat of the red Camaro, rifled through the glove box, then paused to remove a plastic bag from his pocket. He'd begun stealing cars when he was 12. Older cars were his speciality, but he could do the new ones just as easily. Most salesmen would gladly hand over the keys—with a little prep work, that is.

He could speak English without a trace of an accent, but preferred to wield a mixture of Chicano slang. Raised surrounded in poverty, the only two things Angelo's parents had given him were a pretty good brain and a generic, honest-looking face. Everything else came from years of foster care and juvenile detention. By the time he was 18, he'd learned well the art of how to keep from getting caught.

Whenever Angelo robbed a place, he only took what he needed, and made sure everything was left exactly as he'd found it. Using this tack, people usually didn't notice their things were gone for several days. By then, any hint of a trail was cold.

The thug had been prepping the witless used car manager for several days, using a cloned cell phone number and caller ID. The stolen phone now lay in the trash can at the Chrysler dealership, a little slap in the face when they'd find it. Angelo had expected to steal a car if something remotely worth taking came in. The luxury Chrysler itself wasn't worth his time.

Slipping the gun he'd found into the bag, Angelo took a moment to see if any cash or credit cards were in the wallet before jamming it in a second bag. Then, removing a phone clipped to his hip, he placed a call. "Vinnie, I found a gun and wallet—belongs to a dude named Greg Hart. What you want me to do with 'em?"

"Leave the leather, bring the piece. Have you finished the house?"

"No, man. I'm still in the garage."

“Any trouble?”

“Nah, just some guy with greasy hair tried to follow me in a brown 4x4.”

Vinnie probed the recesses of his brain, trying to place the truck. “Don’t take any chances. . . . Drop the car at the warehouse.”

As instructed, Angelo removed the wallet and returned it to the glove box before climbing the steps to the kitchen. Drawing the blinds, he meticulously searched each drawer and cupboard, afterwards opening the blinds and moving on to the next room.

Stephanie trudged across the parking lot. Mitch had given her the Escort as a present four weeks before their wedding, now nearly three years past. Her parents had taken away the new Nissan she’d been driving when their bitter words hadn’t changed her mind about marrying the kid from the junkyard.

Mitch had re-built the totaled Ford and was planning on selling it. He didn’t think twice about signing it over and registering the little car in her name. He’d wanted to give her this gift, even if the pressure from her parents did change her mind.

Stephanie fitted the key in the ignition and turned the motor over. It sputtered, almost started, finally spinning freely as if in protest to the warming temperatures. She leaned across the passenger seat and rolled down the window, then opened her own to let the scorching air escape.

The car had had a few minor problems the first week she drove it, but Mitch was quickly able to solve them. But recently it’d seemed harder and harder to start, though—wouldn’t you know it—the problem never seemed to manifest itself when Mitch drove it.

She would wait a minute; sometimes that’s all the old heap needed. Unfolding her paycheck, she thought of the pile of bills collecting on the counter at home. The sale of the GTO would bring welcome relief to the mounting financial pressures that seemed to plague the young couple. Fortunately, Mitch took care of the bills and always seemed to find enough money to pay for schooling as they went. He was shrewd—kept both of them walking a tight budget.

Stephanie wasn’t accustomed to the stressful realities of money. Her parents had taken her credit cards away only a few days before they took her car. She was grateful for Mitch’s willingness to deal with the money woes, but still found it a chore conforming to his bud-

get. The landlord had called a few days earlier to ask where the rent was. Mitch had promised he'd have it by the 15th, only two days away.

After trying to start the car a second time, the motor gasped, popped, then jolted into a gentle hum as if nothing had been the matter. Stephanie decided to stop at home for a cool shower before cashing her check and buying a few new clothes, one thing she knew how to do all too well.

Bino paced the oil-stained concrete. It'd been 40 minutes since Jose Vasquez took Mitch's car. Way too long. He chastised Janice for mixing up his instructions—"Not to let the man take the car. He *didn't* trust him"—then advised Mitch to call either the dealership or the police.

Mitch balked at the latter suggestion. "Can't call the police. The car's not licensed or registered. The plates are off some wreck at my grandpa's junkyard."

Bino paid Janice in cash and sent her home. She went reluctantly, still sure Bino had told her to let the guy take the car and mumbling about how sorry she was. Her usual smiling, cordial disposition were all but spent, replaced by groans and grumbling. Mitch couldn't bring himself to be angry at her. She already seemed to be in enough agony.

Bino turned to Mitch. "Sorry kid, it's my fault," he apologized. "I should've written a note. She sometimes forgets things."

Mitch nodded. No need to panic until he visited the Chrysler dealer to find out if Angelo Vasquez worked there. Bino was impressed by the kid's cool-headedness. He watched, stone-faced, as his young friend pulled from the station and drove away in the stolen Chrysler.

NINE

GREG TEETERED ACROSS Main Street and up the alley behind American Biomedical. The single, oversized shoe had fallen from his swollen right foot as he ran to avoid being hit by a semi, whose hurried driver had borne down on the horn instead of the brakes. His tattered pants were held up by a flimsy rope fastened around his computer-chair stomach. The shade of the alley offered relief to his bare, blistering feet. Completely drained, he slumped on the ground against the building.

His perception of Wyatt, the young man from the restroom, was now far different from before. The 17-year-old “freak” had recently inherited a five-thousand-dollar death benefit from a grandfather who’d died from Alzheimer’s. Wyatt had served as his main care-giver until Medicare finally agreed to place the old man in a rest home. He had known of the money since before his grandfather was too sick to think, and dreamed of running away to Vegas to gamble it into a fortune, after which his plan called for him to move far from home—far away from his abusive father.

The young man’s great Las Vegas adventure, however, had turned sour. Chased from one casino to another after he had sneaked in and dropped his money into their slots, now all but a few bucks were gone; he’d saved only enough for the bus ride back to Seattle.

Perhaps, though, Wyatt’s being there was predestined. Indeed, for Greg, he’d been an angel in disguise, leading him into an empty stall where, standing naked on the cold tile, the boy washed his dirty shirt, pants and underwear. Some minutes passed before Wyatt handed a wad of moist paper towels over the stall door so Greg could wash himself off. Then came the clothes, having been dried under the restroom’s hand dryer.

As Greg had struggled to dress, the questions Wyatt had asked were far-reaching. Greg had croaked back his answers the best he could.

"You ever hit your kids?"

"No," Greg had answered curtly.

"You ever beat your wife until she couldn't stand up no more, while your kids watched?"

"No."

"You ever come home at night, drag your son from bed and slam him against the wall 'cause he forgot to take out the garbage? . . . How about stealing your wife's paycheck to buy booze? . . . You ever let your kids go hungry for the week?"

"No. . . . No"

"Well, if you had, I'd've told you you'd be better off dead," the young man had said, tears welling up in his eyes as Greg emerged from the bathroom stall.

Now, out on the street, Greg pondered both Wyatt's dismal state and his own catastrophic actions of the day and night before. It already seemed like a lifetime ago. A fever quickly gave way to a bout of shivers caused by the sunburn. These were accompanied by a terrible hangover. He hunched over, favoring his left side in order to escape the pain of the blistering flesh rubbing against his course jeans. Down the alleyway, an old lady pushing a wobbly shopping cart pressed toward him from behind a dumpster. She stopped a half dozen feet away and took a worn-out broom from her cart. "What you doin' here?" she shouted, her toothless jaw flapping on stringy muscles, her rubbery arms shaking the butt of the broom in Greg's face. "Get outta here—this's *our* alley!"

Greg didn't move. Fever and dehydration barely permitted him to remain conscious. "Please leave me alone," he whispered.

Seeing the pitiful figure slouched before her was no threat, the old woman bent closer. "What'd you say?"

Greg closed his eyes in resignation. "Leave me alone."

The woman bent still closer to see who it was she was threatening. Greg lifted his eyelids. A pair of cataract-covered pupils were pressed inches from his face. The tramp was chomping on her gums, smacking her lips together, breathing heavily through her crooked nose. "No, he ain't going to hurt us—he can hardly sit up," she grunted, peering to one side as if speaking to someone. "Looks pretty bad, don't ya' see?"

Greg gazed in the direction of her presumed companion; no one was there. He began to shiver and shake, then sagged to the ground

and pulled his knees up to his trembling torso.

“I think he needs our help. Now shut up an’ gimme a hand; I’ve had ‘nough of your naggin’ today.” The old woman tugged at Greg’s sweat-stained shirt until he sat up. “Don’t just stand there—help me. This man’s fatter ‘an the last one.”

With the old woman’s assistance, Greg staggered to his feet. Leaning him over the cart, the woman wove it down the alley to the back of the parking garage, four buildings away. Shifting her gaunt frame, she yanked at the heavy cart, slowly guiding her awkward load behind a green metal power box and into a narrow space hidden under the parking ramp.

“He ain’t gonna hurt us. . . . See, he’s married.” The woman drew Greg’s hand close to her face and examined his grotesquely swollen finger, evidence of an aborted attempt to remove his ring. “If’n he were one ‘a us he wouldn’t still need it, now would he? Look at the skin that ain’t burnt—lily white, fresh from the office, fed plenty well. . . . By the look of his beard, he’s only been out a few days. Gonna take a while for ‘im to toughen up—get street-smart.”

A smelly but warm blanket was gently pulled over Greg’s shivering body and a fuzzy brown pillow tucked under his head before he drifted into a deep sleep. “Now you get some rest, young fella; Nurse here’ll go find somethin’ fer that burn.”

TEN

FOUR BLOCKS FROM HOME the car's engine ground to a halt. Stephanie coasted to the curb, put the car in park, and tried to restart the motor. She turned the key, willing the car to start, her mutterings falling in rhythm with the puny engine's sobs. Then, as if by magic, it sprang to life, whereupon Stephanie pulled from the curb and went her way—heading home, to a place where Angelo Quintano was working his way through the bedroom drawers.

Up to that point he'd collected nothing but the small handgun and a recent photo of Mitch. After pawing through socks, underwear and pantyhose, he stepped to the small walk-in closet and pulled the string to a single light bulb jutting from the ceiling.

The closet was packed with women's clothing, arranged by category: tops hung at the far left, slacks in the middle, designer dresses on the opposite wall. The floor at the front was lined with women's shoes; assorted clothes were stacked against the side and back walls. Most was at least three years old—and quickly falling out of style. Some, badly creased, dangling limply from metal hangers, clearly had not been worn since it had been sorted and hung. A shelf above the closet rods sagged from the weight of designer jeans, folded v-neck shirts and sweaters, piled almost to the ceiling. Angelo pressed his arms between the clothing at the corners to see what might be tucked away out of sight.

At the same moment Angelo removed a metal filing box from its concealment, Stephanie rounded the corner to her dead-end street. Once again, the car's engine sputtered and quit, just three doors from home. This time it wouldn't restart on the first try. The car's resistance, Stephanie decided, was the perfect opportunity to leave it parked on the curb, where Mitch could fix it.

Inside the house, Angelo thumbed through dozens of auto-related invoices and other records, all filed haphazardly. No dividers or tabs separated the stack of papers. Dumping the pile in the center of the closet floor,

he began to search for any document or envelope that might resemble a title.

After rolling up the windows and locking the doors to the Escort, Stephanie walked across the street and up the driveway to the front door of the well-worn rambler home. Two little Mexican boys, wearing only dirty T-shirts and stained underwear that sagged and gaped around their skinny legs, played with rusty Tonka trucks—beds loaded with mud and water—under the shade of a huge Siberian elm tree two lots away.

Stephanie unlocked the door and slipped inside. Immediately she kicked off the shoes that pinched at her swollen feet, unzipped the dress slacks that strangled her waist, and dropped her paycheck on the countertop near a growing pile of bills. The thought of Linda's vicious words kept pounding at her subconscious as she unbuttoned her blouse and tossed it in the clothes basket in the hallway outside the bedroom. She reached to the thermostat on the wall and moved the control from a stifling 82 degrees down to a more comfortable 74. The hum of the compressor could be heard kicking into action in the backyard.

Out of habit, she sidled over to the window to close the drapes while she undressed. Strange—they were already closed. Her mind still pre-occupied with Linda's caustic behavior, she reasoned that she must have forgotten to open them before she left for work that morning.

Trying to crowd the myriad depressing thoughts from her mind, Stephanie began to whisper baby names. She liked to hear them spoken aloud—how they sounded as brother and sister: "Andrea & Austin . . . Carlie & Crosby." She smiled as she let her slacks slip from her slender hips and crumple to the floor near the doorway of the dark closet. Then she reached for the light string.

Angelo, from under partial cover of the bulging wardrobe, inched his hand closer to the pistol wrapped in the plastic bag tucked beneath his belt. The light switch clicked. Nothing happened. *Bulb must be burned out*, she thought.

"Drake & Darcy," she uttered under her breath as she pulled the string again, then felt in the darkness for an empty hanger. Drake . . . Darcy—they were two of her favorites, but unfortunately they meant, respectively, "dragon" and "girl of dark hair." She didn't know if that made any difference. . . .

She started to reach up to unscrew the bulb, oblivious to the heat that yet

radiated from its glassy surface, then paused. “Jeff & Stef.” These brought a smirk to her lips. Lowering her arm, she tugged another hanger from the rod.

Angelo’s eyes widened as he studied her fashion-model profile, silhouetted in the light from the bedroom window. The woman now was standing less than two feet away, fumbling in the darkness. From the back of the closet, lustful thoughts rustled noiselessly through the cavity like a silent black wind as the meticulous thief struggled to steady his thoughts and remember why he was there.

Mitch parked in front of the used car office of Smith Chrysler and strode directly through the swinging glass doors. A bitter anger had begun to swell up from inside his chest, even as his mind tried to convince his bursting heart and lungs that everything would be okay. At any second he hoped beyond hope to see his glistening gold GTO inside one of the mechanic bays.

The receptionist glanced up from her desk and smiled at the potential customer. “Hi, may I help you?”

“I hope. Do you have a salesman named Jose Vasquez?”

“We do—he’s our manager. Would you like to speak with him?” Mitch breathed a sigh of relief as the bubbly brunette called over the intercom, “Mr. Vasquez, come to the sales floor please. You have a customer waiting.”

Stephanie picked up the pants from the doorway. Her eyes had finally adjusted to the dim room. She snapped the slacks to the hanger clips and pried the mass of clothes apart to wedge the garment between the overflowing bulk. “Joseph & Josephine.” Her hand glided down the pants to straighten them among the others. *Nah, sounds too much like a prophet and a gypsy.* She drifted away from the closet.

Meanwhile, buried inside its inky recesses, her uninvited visitor’s heart quickened—not because of his close proximity as an intruder, but out of lust.

Stephanie went around the corner and dropped her underwear in the clothes basket before entering the bathroom. When the water started, Angelo hurriedly resecured the partially unscrewed light bulb and finished rummaging through the wad of papers he’d jammed back in the metal box. He found four Nevada titles among the clutter and replaced all but the

title to the GTO, which he folded into his back pocket.

After returning the box to its hiding place, he paused at the bathroom door, slightly ajar. The hypnotic sound of splashing water, the flowery scent of bodywash, the blurred, misty image cast on the fogged-up mirror . . . they were all more than enticing. But, no. He must keep his mind on his main objective.

Plodding on down the hall, he disappeared through the kitchen door and backed the GTO from the garage, leaving his unsuspecting non-victim standing under the rush of soothing, hot water.

A dark-skinned, rotund man—nearly as wide as he was tall—dressed in white shirt and dark blue pants pulled up high around his chunky midsection, waddled onto the sales floor from the back. “Can I help you?” he asked in a jocular tone, his breathing labored from the extra load he carried.

“I’m here to see Angelo.”

“At your service.” The man presented his thick hand and gave Mitch a friendly shake.

Mitch’s gut churned. “You have a son named Angelo?”

“No, sir, I’m one of a kind. No children, married only to my work.” He chuckled as if it was the first time he’d used the line.

Mitch pointed at the 300 parked outside the showroom window. “Does that car belong to you?”

“Sure thing. Does your boss want me to fill out the paperwork?”

“Who?”

“Your boss . . .” the big man smiled.

“I think we’ve both been had,” Mitch said, a solemn expression etched onto his face.

“Don’t you work for the Burger King down the street?”

Mitch shook his head. “The guy that borrowed your car stole mine and gave me your business card. Said he was you.”

Mr. Vasquez’s droll personality transformed to fire and brimstone. Motioning to his receptionist, he demanded she get the police on the phone at once. Company policy didn’t allow for customers to take cars from the lot without a salesman, and he was about to turn the floodgates loose on his own actions.

“Wait!” Mitch exclaimed. “You haven’t been hurt. Your car’s back—*mine’s* the one missing.”

The receptionist paused. Mr. Vasquez turned on his heels, dropped both thumbs down the front of his enormous pants, then pulled them back up over his belly. "You're right, son. What're you going to do?"

Mitch had been wondering the same thing. "I don't know. Something's wrong. This guy knew he was going to steal my car before he even saw it. I think he set you up so he could set me up."

"Let's go back to my office." The hulking, panting fellow reached up and put his hand on Mitch's shoulder. "What kind of car did he steal?"

Over the next few minutes, the two men exchanged as much information as possible. Mr. Vasquez was hard-pressed to give even a rudimentary description of the car thief: ". . . wore a low baseball cap, sun-glasses, average height, weight, Spanish accent." He'd been corresponding by phone for the past two or three days with the owner of the Burger King several blocks down the street. Seemingly legitimate, the guy had been looking for a good deal on a good used car. The 300 had come in on a new car trade that very morning, and Vasquez had called to invite him to come in and take a look at it.

"He told me he'd send one of his employees by to pick it up."

"Then you have his number?"

Vasquez shuffled through a tangle of papers on his desk. Finally he retrieved from the clutter a note with a name and number scrawled across its surface, and handed it across the desk, shoving the phone toward Mitch with his other hand. "It's your car."

Mitch dialed the number and waited, hung up, then dialed again. Discouraged, he asked if he could keep the scrap of paper, thanked the manager for his help, and asked for a ride home.

Out in the showroom, the receptionist was bent over the garbage container, digging through its contents. She stood up, slightly embarrassed, when the men appeared. "I heard a phone ringing," she apologized. "Twice. . . ."

Mitch went over to her desk and, for a third time, dialed the number on the slip of paper. A faint ring could be heard coming from the container, kind of a muffled plea. Lifting a crumpled Burger King bag from the basket, Vasquez produced the wailing, ketchup-smeared cell phone. Mr. Vasquez readily consented to Mitch taking the phone with him as they left the showroom

ELEVEN

THE STENCH OF STAGNANT AIR was the first thing Greg noticed as he roused from his fevered dreams. Then he surveyed the bleak confines of the tiny shelter. Next came the sound of squeaking wheels from a rusted shopping cart, announcing the return of his deranged old hostess.

The old woman crawled under the gray carpet that hung over the opening to the concrete void. In her skeletal hands were a small plastic bag, a beat-up thermos and a pair of rusty scissors. “How’s the patient?” she asked.

Greg moaned and tried to push the foul blanket away from his chin. “I need to get out of here.”

“Now you jus’ stay put. We got somethin’ that might help draw out the heat,” she grinned. “‘Lo ‘vera—a powerful herb. Mama taught me how a use it more ‘en 50 years ago.” She took the scissors and began to cut at the splotchy fabric of Greg’s right pant leg, her crippled fingers working for all they were worth. “Looks like ‘em blisters started poppin’. From the looks ‘a it, you musta been in the sun five, six hours. Scuttlebutt on the street has it the man that robbed you got 50 bucks fer your watch. Musta been a nice one.”

The old woman paused when she reached Greg’s hip. “No, we won’t completely undress him; he’s still got his underwear on.” The old woman turned back to Greg. “This’s my daughter Belle. She’s embarrassed to see your nakedness. . . . Everybody calls me ‘Nurse’—don’t worry, I seen it all ‘fore.”

She spread the mouth of the plastic bag, removed a stalk of aloe vera plant, popped it in her mouth and began to chew, her fluttering gums chomping up and down. Then she spit a sticky slurry into her palm and gently patted the blistered skin on Greg’s leg. After applying a second and third handful, “Nurse” pulled the outer husk of aloe vera from her lips.

“Don’t taste so good, and might give me the runs tomorrow, but my ol’

hands have a hard time squeezin' out the juice."

Under any other circumstance, Greg would have been completely disgusted—not to mention embarrassed—but the pain from the second degree burns over 60% of his fair skin had a way of making him drop his guard. The coolness of the soothing herb felt good. A soft "Thank you" fell from his cracked, swollen lips.

"No, no, don't thank me 'til you gets the bill," she giggled. Her gnarled hands trembled as they strained to unscrew the lid to the thermos. Then one of them reached down and extracted a dirty straw from her pocket. "Here, now we better get some fluid in you 'fore you dry out like a ol' bone."

Greg sipped at the used straw. Cold orange juice ran over his parched tongue and down his throat.

"Got it from the church on Stewart. Reverend says he'll help us anytime. Always good ta have friends, ain't it?"

Greg nodded. This new friend was unlike any he'd ever had.

"Good luck with your car," Mr. Vasquez said as Mitch exited the car. "I'll be happy to testify, if you can find him."

"Thanks for the ride. I appreciate the offer." The Chrysler pulled away. Mitch, standing on the curb, spied the Escort down the street. Why was it parked there? And what was Stephanie doing home so early? He took a deep breath and turned toward the house. Telling his wife about the stolen car wouldn't be easy. And explaining why he hadn't called the police would be even harder.

The open paycheck on the kitchen counter reminded Mitch of the new clothes he'd promised his wife. As if in tandem, the unopened credit card application further dampened his mood. Two opposite reminders, one clear message: they were in financial trouble. The loss of income from the GTO would be hard to absorb, setting them back months. It might even push school back for another year. They were already in desperate straits; now how would they survive?

Mitch had never lied to Stephanie about anything. But this was different, he decided. He had to protect her feelings. He could justify not saying anything—not yet, at least—until after he recovered his car.

He made his way down the hallway to the bedroom and pushed open the door. Stephanie lay on the bed, dressed in a pair of his baggy sweats. She jerked to a seated position, startled by his entry.

“Oh . . . you’re home. I must have dozed off. I—I didn’t even hear the garage open. . . . So, did you sell it?”

“Not yet.” He could barely get the words out. He quickly changed the subject. “You’re home early. . . . What’s the car doing out on the street?”

Stephanie groaned. “You wouldn’t believe what a horrible day it’s been.”

“I might; try me.” Stephanie’s eyes glistened with tears as she described what had happened: their obnoxious neighbor Al coming on to her that morning . . . Linda and her double-crossing ways . . . the little Ford twice dying on the way home.

Later, after an hour of Mitch’s thoughtful attention, she felt better. That’s what she loved about him: he could listen without judging or trying to fix anything. She could never understand where he’d learned to be so sensitive to others’ feelings, especially without a mother around.

“What can I do to help?”

“Can you fix the car?”

“That’s the easy part. You want I should punch Al too?” Mitch doubled his fists, stuck out his gut and danced about, shadow boxing.

Stephanie laughed. “No, I think I can handle him.”

“I’ll take your car and run a few errands. It’s probably just the fuel pump.”

The phone rang as Mitch lifted the spare keys from a dish on the counter. “Hello . . . Yeah, I know. I’m sorry, I thought I’d have it by today. . . . I will, I promise—by Thursday at the latest. . . . Yeah, I understand.”

“The rent?” Stephanie asked.

Mitch nodded.

“I’ll wait a few more days for clothes.”

“No, don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. Tomorrow we’ll go shopping.”

“When does your flight leave?”

“Sunday night.”

“And you get back when?”

“Sometime Wednesday evening.”

“This will be the first time for us to be apart,” Stephanie pouted, a lament marked by both mock anguish and genuine sadness.

“I know. I was hoping to surprise you with a ticket, but it’s not going to happen.”

“I’ll be fine, especially if I can park in the garage. You just go show ‘em your stuff.”

Mitch reached out and pulled his wife close. "I don't know what I'd do without you. I'll get us out of here—promise."

"I have no doubts. That's why I married you."

Vinnie scanned the assortment of unopened crates lining the rented warehouse. New dishwashers, televisions, VCR's, refrigerators and dozens of other appliances—all purchased using others' credit and waiting to cool off—were stacked to the ceiling, awaiting new homes in other states. Mitch's GTO was stowed in one corner, along with two other beautifully restored antique cars.

Angelo climbed from the driver's seat, a rag and a bottle of glass cleaner in hand. Vinnie shook his head. "I don't know why you do that. We've never had one traced back yet," he said, unrolling a wad of cash from his pocket.

"Just 'cause you have money and hot-shot attorneys don't mean you can let down your guard," countered Angelo. "I been in them places before, man, and I never wanna go back." Angelo pulled the car title from his pocket.

"Have it your way." Vinnie flipped off ten bills and handed them to his employee—petty thief, car detailer, gopher, ferret . . . you name it, Angelo did it. "The guy in the truck, did he have a flat nose and pocked face?"

"He was too far away. All's I know is that he had Utah plates."

"Mike," Vinnie mumbled.

"Who?"

"A dead man."

Mike paced the floor of his shop, cell phone pressed up to his ear, giving whoever was on the other end an earful. "You're right, he's going to get hurt! He's already had his car stolen. I don't know how you do it down here, but the offices I've worked with listen to us men in the field. I won't let this kid get sucked into our trap just because they start squeezing him."

Just then Mitch pulled up to the closed shop doors to see if he could use a few of Mike's tools to fix the malfunctioning Escort. The way it acted still led him to believe it was just a bad connection.

"You either get the kid on the payroll or transfer me back north—" The door opened and Mitch entered the shop. "Hey—talk to you later. Mitch just came in."

Mitch pointed a finger at his boss. "I didn't know you had a cell phone."
"Just got it."

"Cool. Hey, mind if I take an hour to work on my wife's car?"

"No problem. . . . How'd it go with the GTO?"

Mitch stopped, blinked hard, then swallowed. "Not so good." He turned his face toward the bay door.

"What happened?"

"The sucker ripped me off. Planned it for days." His jaw tightened involuntarily. "Worst part is . . . I think Bino set me up."

"How's that?"

"Claimed he told Janice to tell me *not* to let him take it. She says it was the other way around."

"Look, kid, you're dealing with some bad dudes. Did you call the cops?"

"No. The car was running illegal plates."

"Doesn't matter. They can still take down a report."

"I've got to see Janice. She knows more about him than anybody else."

"You want some help? I might make a better snoop than a body man." He chuckled at his joke.

"No way. You've got enough problems trying to keep this place going. Don't count on Vinnie, either."

"Why?"

Mitch's head bowed. "He didn't come here for you. He—he offered *me* a job."

"So what'd you say?"

"The guy's a clown. What do you think I told him?"

Mike nodded. "Look, I've been thinking about packing it in. I gave it a shot, but I just don't have what it takes. If I did, this place would be filled with customers."

"You can do it."

"No, the phone got disconnected because I'm going home. I was going to tell you this morning, 'til the Ferrari came in." He watched the kid slump dejectedly onto the shop stool. "You lost your tools too, didn't you?"

"I couldn't even bring myself to tell Stef. I'm supposed to leave for VICA finals Sunday."

"Look, I paid the rent so I've got two weeks. Use whatever you need.

Who knows, maybe someone'll offer me a job too? Besides, I know a few of Jimmy's flaky friends—they might've heard where your car took off to."

"Thanks."

Mitch spent 20 minutes pulling the gas tank on the Escort and cleaning and tightening the connection on the fuel pump. After returning the tools to their places on the wall, he headed out to see Janice.

"How well do you know Mike?" Vinnie demanded.

Bino was sitting in Vinnie's penthouse office on the 13th floor of Three Queens. The casino was one of the older buildings left standing in the city. Fancy new gambling joints had sprung up all around. Vinnie had spent a small fortune to make the office look and feel like those of the big boys.

"Not that well."

"He a cop?"

"Nah. . . ."

"Why was he following Angelo today?"

"How should I know?" Bino reached over to adjust the valve on his oxygen tank. His heart rate was rising by the second.

"This Mike moves into town and just happens to meet up with you. The next thing I know he steals my best painter and half the car junkies from my shop. The guy can't paint—and you don't know nothin' 'bout him?"

"As far as I know . . . the guy's what he says he is." Bino again adjusted the valve.

Vinnie stalked across the room and plunked down on the leather sofa next to Bino. "If you're on the take," he sneered, taking hold of the slender hose connected to Bino's nose piece and kinking it between his fingers, "you won't live long enough to pay another dime of your debt to me."

The frail man began to gasp for air and pawing helplessly at Vinnie's hand.

"I need the kid. He's got talent and I got three cahs comin' in from Jersey that need to be cleaned up. You do what you gotta do to get him on the hook. Wouldn't want your bones licked clean by the coyotes like those—" He released the hose. Bino gulped in the precious oxygen. "What's the kid need?"

"Money," Bino said, panting. "He's . . . broke."

“Then make him a hard loan.”

TWELVE

KEEPING AN EYE ON THE STATION from across the street seemed like the right thing to do. Mitch reached down by the floor in front of him, felt for the lever, and forced the Escort's bucket seat into a reclining position. He weighed how best to approach Janice about the earlier mix-up and wondered how loyal she would be to Bino.

A city bus pulled to the curb between the Escort and the Husky station, blocking his view. A ragged man stepped from the open door, clutching in his hand a manila envelope. He paused at the curb and glanced around. Mitch looked away in hopes the man wouldn't hit him up for a handout. Three lousy dollars was all that was left in his wallet.

From the corner of his eye Mitch saw the man maneuver himself across the busy street and stop at the pay booth, where Janice slid open the glass window. She gave a nod, then pointed below and tried to wave the man away. Stooping low, the indigent fellow opened the mail drop and deposited the envelope.

Mitch sat up, taking notice of the strange episode, and watched the man stagger back across the traffic and take a seat on the bus-stop bench less than 30 feet away.

The station hadn't had a single paying customer in the 20 minutes Mitch had been there. He raised the seat back up, pulled across the street to the station, pumped three dollars of gas into his tank and approached the window.

"Hi, Mitch," Janice sputtered, red-faced. "I'm so sorry about your car. Did you find it?"

"Nah, it's long gone. . . ." He pushed the crumpled bills across the counter. "Sorry about the small purchase. I was counting on the sale of the car to help . . ." His voice trailed off.

A wave of despair swept across the woman's face like a scorching

desert wind. “Bino’s been telling me I’m getting forgetful.” Her jowls drooped like melted wax.

Mitch felt guilty for turning up the heat, but he needed answers. And now was the time to start getting them. “Had you ever seen the guy before?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I saw him at all.”

“Yesterday when you left you were almost sure Bino had told you to let the guy take my car.”

“Unless I’m losing my mind, I’d still swear to it.” She turned to watch a beat-up, lime-green Ford sedan full of rowdies squeal into the station on thread bare tires. The passenger door swung open and slammed against the hinges even before the vehicle came to a stop.

Mitch and Janice looked on as a large girl in her late teens, wearing a tight, low-cut tank-top and revealing shorts, struggled to climb off the lap of the male passenger in the front seat. She kicked an empty beer can from the cluttered floor, landed on the concrete with one foot, and hopped from the car, screaming. Her body jiggled as she spun around to swat at the retracting arm of the male passenger. In doing so, the manila envelope she held in her hand grazed the man’s cheek. Probably in his mid-twenties, he tilted his head back in a cynical laugh, seen but unheard over the pounding beat of the vibrating music that rattled the vehicle.

The woman promenaded over to where Mitch was standing, waving her wide hips with a sexual flourish at the carload of single-minded men. Mitch, not about to stand in her way, gave her a wide berth. She bent over at the mail drop beneath the teller window and peered back between her thick arm and heavy breasts to see if the men were still watching. Then, as her finale, she recklessly jammed the envelope into the opening.

Mitch observed the faces of the men as the woman waltzed back to the car and precariously climbed into the back seat, lounging among the outstretched tentacles of her waiting male harem. One of the men kept his face conspicuously obscured by the center post between the car windows. Mitch stepped to one side. Against the glare of the setting sun glancing through the back window, he could clearly see Andy Kostecki among the car’s occupants. Then the roudy vehicle lurched from the station.

“What was that all about?” Mitch asked as the beer can, driven by

the undying desert breeze, rolled across the concrete and came to a stop next to his shoe.

"It's the same every Friday night. They pay their bills using the drop."

Mitch lifted his foot and stomped the aluminum cylinder flat. "They're actual paying customers?"

"I guess so."

"You've seen 'em buy gas?"

"I'm not sure—I only work part-time. . . ."

Mitch bent down as he spoke, freed the envelope from its jammed position in the mail drop, and artfully slid it up the side of his pant leg, simultaneously retrieving the flattened can and depositing it in the nearby receptacle. From her perch, Janice was completely unaware of what he'd done. "Something's outta place here," he mused, half to himself. "I know one of the passengers in that car, a big-time loser. Hasn't worked an honest day in his life."

"I've often thought things seemed odd myself. I keep my mouth shut, though, 'cause I need the extra income. Please don't say anything to Bino."

"I won't say a word. . . . Can I ask one more question?"

"Sure."

"Where does he get all the hot stuff he sells?"

"That! He's a big bag of wind. Says the kids buy the close-out junk better if they think it's stolen. The police have come plenty of times over the years asking for his proof-of-purchase. He thinks it's a game. Uh, speaking of the bag of wind . . ." Both turned to see Bino's Audi wheeze into the station. "He always locks up on Friday nights. Not a word now—you promised."

"Yep."

Bino wrestled with his oxygen, dragging it to the booth. "Any luck with the goat?" he huffed.

"The real Jose Vasquez is five-foot-six, three-hundred-fifty pounds. Got set-up, just like me."

Janice gathered her things and made for the door. "G'night, boys. I'm going home before it gets dark. Sorry again, Mitch, for being so forgetful."

Mitch sought to turn off the heat before she went home. "It's not your fault. He probably would have gotten it anyway."

“What do you mean . . . ‘set-up’?” Bino plopped down in his swivel chair and leaned forward wearily to rest his elbows on the desk—and to light up a new smoke. He adjusted a brass frame that sat on the desk. “My daughter—12 next week.”

“She’s a pretty girl.”

“Takes after her mother. . . . Shame neither one of them like me much.” Bino fiddled with the valve on his tank.

“You supposed to smoke around oxygen?”

“Why not. . . . It ain’t blown up yet. ‘Sides, if it did . . . it might do me a favor. Now tell me . . . about the set-up.”

Mitch let out a sigh. “He started making calls to the dealer days before he ripped off the 300, just to convince me he was legit. I fell for it hook, line and sinker.”

“I *warned* Janice . . . *not* to let him take it. Something didn’t feel right. Did you call the cops?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ve got a friend . . .”

“No.” Mitch didn’t need any more of Bino’s friends. “I’ve got to think this thing through.”

“Your car. . . .” The tension was as thick as the haze that hovered inside the small room. “Driving the wife’s car, I see,” said Bino, finally.

“I put my last three bucks of gas in it.”

“The guy that owns this place . . . he’s a banker of sorts—”

“I don’t know how he stays in business,” Mitch interrupted with a smirk. “I’ve been the only paying customer here in the last 30 minutes.”

“My point exactly. . . . He bought the place . . . a year ago because . . . the owners were upside-down.” Bino drew a long drag on the glowing stick, let out a hard cough, yet another, and plowed on. “The place is . . . scheduled to be demolished . . . this fall. New . . . fuel tank regulations.” The coughing fit resumed, the color flushing into Bino’s face.

“You okay?”

Bino, ignoring the question, rolled the near-spent cigarette in the ashtray and wiped the moisture from his bloodshot eyes. “What I’m trying . . . to tell you is he’ll loan you . . . a few bucks if you need it. I know . . . you were counting on the . . . the sale to take care of things.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll go see my grandpa this weekend. He’ll usually help me out.”

“Whatever. It’s here . . . if ya need it.” Bino crushed the cigarette butt in the tray Janice had emptied, shook another from the pack, and eased it between his lips.

Mitch leaned his elbows on the counter. It was now or never. He spoke abruptly. “It might be a few days before I pay you. Do you want me to leave it in the mail drop if you’re not here?”

Bino’s poker face gave up the game as he pivoted sharply, let the unlit cigarette fall from his lips, and fumbled for an answer. “My good customers . . . pay in person. . . . Uh, by the way, Vinnie . . . told me he offered you . . . a job. . . .” Bino had faltered trying to change the subject. Bino was in on the racket—Mitch knew it, and Bino knew he knew it. The pathetic man was trying to blow smoke and mirrors at the lost hand.

“He’s a wise-guy. Tell him to ask Mike—he’s looking.”

“I’ll do that.”

Mitch had been betrayed. Now he fixed his stare on the traitor. “I’ll find my car, you know,” he said before turning to leave.

Once the Escort’s shrill whine had faded into the night, Bino hung his head and struck a match. He spoke softly to himself. “Sorry, kid. . . . I hope you do.” Hesitating, he shook out the match, pulled the cigarette from his lips with his nicotine-stained thumb and forefinger, and heaved out a shallow breath.

Mitch drove half a block to the grocery store and pulled next to the phone booth. He extracted the envelope from his pant leg to examine its contents. A blank credit card application and a voucher slip with a four-digit number was all that was inside. Mitch placed a fingertip to his forehead. *What was going on?* He read the address on the application. It was only three blocks from his own home.

Scrounging through the ash tray, Mitch dug out enough change to call Stephanie. She had almost learned to tolerate his late hours without complaint. Her visits to the rest home had softened the late hours Mitch worked. He’d never outright lied to her. And this “delayed truth,” he rationalized, would be no different. She didn’t need to worry. Besides, she’d never understand the story behind the stolen GTO and his reasons for spying on Bino. Repairing her car for a few more hours

seemed to be a much better excuse.

“It’s alright,” Stephanie replied. “Anyway, we’ll be at Heritage Care until after ten.”

Mitch checked his watch and shook his head. It seemed like they were drifting further and further apart. She was finding ways to be less dependent on him all the time, and he wasn’t sure he liked it. “Well, Maggie’ll be here in a minute, so I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll see you at home,” he said coolly. “Have a good time.”

Stephanie sensed the tautness behind her husband’s response. He’d never said so, but it bugged him that she found such joy in serving others. “Maggie just honked—I’ve got to go. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” The words rang guilt in his thoughts. He hung up the phone.

Mitch left the car and proceeded on foot across the parking lot leading back to the Husky station. It didn’t take much effort to scale the chain-link fence that ran along the rear. He crept through the low-grown weeds that had sprung up between the oil-stained gravel, until he came to a small abandoned lot behind the fuel tanks—once used to sell bulk fuel. The station’s fluorescent lights shown in stark contrast against the gloomy sky. The place was a dump. It didn’t even sell candy bars, let alone groceries or fast food.

As he wove between the tanks, Mitch noticed someone else parked at the station. Just as before, the driver got out and shoved an envelope through the drop. The only logical answer to the stolen credit applications was stolen credit—something Mitch had heard of but knew virtually nothing about.

THIRTEEN

EDDIE BENT TO PICK UP the last of the scattered free weights. Heaving it onto his bony shoulder, he replaced it on the rack. The gym had evolved into a dump of human steroid waste since Clint had taken over. Now Eddie was in grieving, his moral conscience tormented. All he could do was look on helplessly as his grandson turned an honest living into a front for organized crime and illegal steroid sales. The 80-year-old man, an ex-middleweight champ, fought daily with the decision whether to turn the young tough in or continue to turn a deaf ear and hope his own life ended before the joint suffered a final-round knock-out blow.

The boisterous voices from the upstairs offices tugged at Eddie's curiosity. The building in which he'd spent the majority of his adult life echoed the clatter of undisciplined living. More often than not, the racket drove him from his cramped, main-floor studio apartment out onto the streets, where he would walk for miles.

Clint was a ladies' man, frequently inviting the girls from the escort service next door over to party. Thinking the moment would be a good opportunity to collect a few more condemning notes on the illegal goings-on, Eddie crept up the rickety staircase to see who the visitors were. On his way, the old man dug his handkerchief from his back pocket to stifle a sneeze caused by a pesky nose hair, listened to see if he'd been detected, then renewed his ascent.

Halfway up the stairs Eddie heard Clint's doorbell ring. He stopped and waited. The bell rang again—this time long and hard. Finally Clint's muffled voice cried out over the giggles, "Who is it?"

A cold, harsh voice crackled over the intercom. "Vinnie. Open up!"

Clint had installed an alarm in the basement and an electric door lock and intercom on the front door to free himself from having to go down to let anyone in after hours. The door lock buzzed. Trapped between Vinnie coming from below and Clint's office window above, Eddie, his old

heart racing, scrambled to the top of the stairs, seeking refuge. He crept past the window and into the jumbled storage space across the hall. Luckily, Clint was far too busy to notice. It was then, safely ensconced in the darkness, that Eddie fully realized what he'd witnessed through the curtainless glass. He drew back sharply, embarrassed—even as a seasoned old fighter—by the sight, now permanently etched into his brain. He pressed the door mostly shut and stared through the crack into the well-lit office.

Vinnie's head appeared as he ascended the stairway. Then he paused and stooped to pick up an object from the second to the last step. Eddie looked on as the racketeer resumed his march up the stairs, thumbing through a small black notebook. The old man reached to his hip. The horrible realization hit him harder than he'd ever been hit in the ring: the notebook had fallen from his pocket when he stopped to wipe his nose.

Pausing in the hallway, Vinnie read from the book, his jaw muscles alternately tightening and releasing as if in spasm. Brusquely, he seized the doorknob to Clint's office and flung the door inward with a thunderous crash.

"Vinnie . . . come join the party!" Clint's inebriated voice was slurred as he raised a drink in the air.

The menacing, frenzied expression on Vinnie's face sent the three girls scrambling. "Get outta here and back to work!" he howled. The half-dressed women promptly gathered their things and tip-toed around Vinnie, still firmly planted in the doorway.

With the girls out of earshot, Vinnie hissed, "Bino called—said you missed the pickup!"

Clint, unperturbed, reached over and buzzed the automatic door to let the girls out. "I'll get it tomorrow," he shrugged, still cheery.

Vinnie's face reddened in anger. The young punk's attitude was too much to take. Almost in a single motion he jerked a handgun from the silk-lined jacket of his suit, rammed up against Clint and shoved its barrel up his nose. "You *better* get your act together," he snarled, "or I'll find a replacement for you just like that." The hammer on the weapon clicked into the firing position. Clint's expression sank and his tanned face blanched as he stared, cross-eyed, down the cold metal shaft.

Meanwhile, Eddie, outraged by what he was seeing, swept the door open and started silently across the hall to protect his only grandchild. Step-

ping unnoticed inside the entryway adjoining the room, he listened as the entire exchange ricocheted through the air and vibrated along the walls. The old man, breathing hard, quietly swung the door closed, leaving it slightly ajar.

“Now tell me what this is,” Vinnie demanded, dropping the black book on the table.

Clint sat up, sober-faced, fully attentive, and flicked the hair from his face. “That’s Gramps’ weight book.”

“I know that. I’ve seen the old fart write in it.” Grabbing a handful of Clint’s hair in his fist and shoving his face forward, Vinnie drove his point home. “Take a look at what he’s been writing, you stupid ox!”

Clint fumbled at the book’s pages and tried to focus—a difficult task with his face crushed so close to the table. “The old man’s been spying on me!” Clint barked.

His right hand still firmly attached to Clint’s hair, Vinnie reached with his left hand and retrieved his cell phone. His already peeved tone took on an even more grouchy air. “Angelo”, he yelled as he shoved Clints head back, “I need you to take care of the pickup at Bino’s. Bring it to the gym. Clint and me got some business to take care of.” Depositing the phone back in his suit pocket, he centered his gaze once more on his cowering target and, through clenched teeth, said, “Time the old man took a fall.” Clint nodded in agreement.

Eddie, his quivering hand still on the door, felt his heart about to explode. The grandson he’d been willing to risk his life for had just agreed to kill him. Cocking his ear to the side, he discovered that the voices had become both more subdued and sinister.

“You go get the old man and I’ll find somethin’ to whack him with. We’ll make it look like he fell down the back steps.” The doorknob turned practically in Eddie’s hand. “That way we won’t have the place crawlin’ with cops.”

Eddie again ducked for cover, this time behind a stack of nearby boxes. Once Clint had wormed out into the hallway, Vinnie entered the room and flipped on the lights, his eyes darting about. His gaze fixed on a square weight bar lying on a some crates at Eddie’s back.

Eddie readied himself. *The upper-cut left hook oughta do the trick*, he thought, doubling up his fists. It was the same punch that had won him his first professional fight back in 1938. *This Jersey boy with the hard lookin’*

face probably has a glass jaw anyway.

Mitch, sitting atop a discarded five-gallon bucket he'd found among the towering fuel tanks, watched a four door Nissan pull into the station and its driver hop out to open the trunk. It was almost eleven and he'd seen at least 30 people drive into the place and drop envelopes into the mail slot. Only two had actually purchased gas. Bino had made a couple of calls; other than that he'd spent the entire evening puffing on one Camel after another.

The newest patron ambled from the open trunk to the booth's sliding glass door, carrying a metal box. Bino got to his feet and waved his hands in an irritated gesture. Something seemed oddly familiar to Mitch. . . . Then it dawned on him: the guy with the box was the one who'd stolen his car!

Mitch stood, took two steps forward and grasped the top rail of the six-foot chain-link fence dividing the storage area from the parking lot. Then he hesitated. If he confronted the piece of trash now, what would it accomplish? A better option was to follow the Chicano—but there wasn't time for Mitch to get to his vehicle.

Within seconds, the car thief had retrieved the metal box inside the pay booth, replaced it with the one he carried, hopped back into his car and sped away. Mitch made a mental note of the license plate number, though he doubted it would ever prove useful.

Mitch's heaving chest and rising pulse rate served as painful reminders of the hundreds of hours of sweat—not to mention thousands of dollars—he'd spent on the GTO, now in someone else's hands. Something else was also painfully disheartening: he'd gotten all the proof he needed that his one-time friend Bino was as dirty as they came.

Vinnie lowered his head and stepped around the boxes, dropping his guard just enough. Eddie struck like a wizened old cobra. His blow was on the mark. Vinnie's head snapped back—and as the ex-champ had guessed, the Jersey rat dropped to the ground like a wet towel on a dirty locker room floor.

"He's not down here!" yelled Clint from below. There was no response. Eddie's eyes darted around the room, seeking an escape route. "Maybe he went out walking," Clint called out again.

The old man clambered to the window and raised it up.

“Nurse! . . . Nurse!” he called out as loud as he dared. “Nurse . . . you and Belle down there?”

Greg, hearing the hushed cries, raised his head from off the smelly pillow. Nurse was not in the small enclosure. He crawled to the carpet that sheathed the opening and eased it aside. There was an old man above, crouched in the open window.

“Nurse—that you? Get help—Clint’s trying to kill me!”

Clint’s calls from the base of the stairs grew more impatient. “Vinnie, did you hear me? . . .”

Eddie squinted down at the alley below. There was no way his old body could take a two-story plunge. Nor could he take on his grandson. Besides being young, Clint was a talented fighter with a rock-hard jaw. If respect had given way to greed, he could easily whip the old man. Ironically, if there was one thing Eddie had taught the boy, it was to be tough. In fact, the only things that had kept Clint’s temper intact when Vinnie had grabbed him by the hair, had been the gun in Vinnie’s hand, one too many drinks, and a hunger to run the operation when the timing was right to move up the ladder.

“Vinnie?”

The shriveled old boxer nervously glanced around the room for any ideas. The laundry chute! Eddie remembered the failed laundry that once occupied the building. When the company had gone belly-up 25 years earlier—not enough business from the neighboring casinos—Eddie, in cleaning the place up, had nailed the chute doors shut to prevent young Clint from falling to the basement when he was first learning to walk.

Vinnie let out a soft moan and began to stir. The effects of the whip-lash Eddie had laid on him were wearing off. Eddie hunched over the crumpled gangster and withdrew the handgun from under his silk jacket. Stuffing it down the front of his own pants, the old man in the white tank top scurried past the crates of used weights to the far wall. The first step squeaked its familiar tune as Clint started up the stairs.

Sinewy hands grappled at the dusty door. Eddie fought to yank it open, but the rusty nails held. Vinnie moaned again as Clint jostled into the room and bent to pry open an eyelid of his fallen ally. Clint knew well the look of a cold-cocked opponent, and stood to look for the perpetrator.

Eddie peered over the crates; Clint’s head swivelled warily, his fists

bunched up. “Gramps, come on out. . . . I’m not gonna hurt my own grandpa.” He inched over to the window. Nurse was pushing her cart down the alley below.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Eddie mumbled to himself. He drew the gun from his pants and raised it with both hands. He couldn’t kill his own flesh and blood, but he might be able to slow him down long enough to get away.

Suddenly Clint stepped in Eddie’s direction. Raised up as if to shield his face, the old man’s hands began to shake—not from fear but out of sorrow. Could he pull the trigger? Then Clint wrenched around like a startled cat at the sound of the door buzzer. He, too, was shaking. What Vinnie had tried to do had crossed the line. His only hope was to get the old man out of the building before Vinnie came to. The door buzzed again. Clint left the room to answer the caller on the intercom.

Eddie lowered the gun; his kin had been saved by the bell. He had only a few seconds to act. He reached to the disassembled weight machine a few feet in front of his face and removed a flat bar. Jamming it under the lip of the door like a crowbar, he pried the chute open, snapping the antique nails like the brittle stitches of a worn out glove.

Vinnie grunted and rolled to his side. Eddie knew it was time to either use the gun or take a dive before the wiseguy came to. A stale smell wafted up from the two-and-a-half-foot-square opening. Cobwebs hung silky and thick. Eddie brandished the gun like a sword and slashed them away. A shiver went up his spine.

Rough-cut lumber, polished smooth in the center, lined the chute’s interior. Small horizontal gaps in the dried, shrunken wood allowed enough space for Eddie’s partially crippled fingers to grip. Pulling his wiry frame through the narrow space, he lifted himself into the murky hollow, hands clinging to the walls like a crab wedged between two wet rocks, his feet pushing against one wall, his back and buttocks against the one opposite.

Eddie pulled the squeaky door closed. Slowly, cautiously, he began to inch his tired old body down to the next floor. He let out a silent chuckle: just look at the depths to which his eavesdropping had taken him!

Clint reappeared in time to see Vinnie, still groggy, stagger to his knees and brace himself against the closest stack of boxes. “What happened?”

Hunching forward, Vinnie shook his head in an attempt to sweep the stars from his addled brain. "The old man popped me—must 'a hit me with a pipe or somethin'."

"Bare fist," Clint said with a hint of pride. "Got a fist like a brick."

Not far below, Eddie, making little progress in his descent, felt a sting in his right arm. He slapped at the spot and felt the unmistakable crunch of a spider among the layers of cobwebs. The haunting thought of the black widows he'd exterminated in the basement kindled within him a venomous dread. Consciously calming his nerves, he couldn't help but hear the intensifying shouts from above.

"I'm gonna kill the old codger!" Vinnie reached for his pocket. "Took my piece, too, the s.o.b."

Just then Angelo entered the room, the metal box from Bino in tow. "Where you want this, man?" He wagged a chin at Vinnie—then did a double-take. "Whoa. You look like you been kicked by a burro. Who popped you?"

The voices droned on above him. Eddie had only traveled halfway to the next floor when he felt his muscles cramp up. His legs shook from fatigue; his sore back cried out. Knowing that if he didn't straighten out soon he'd lose all control, he reached for the boards. If he could just hang on a few seconds more, he could hoist himself up and find room to stretch his legs. At that very moment on the floor above, Vinnie was straightening himself up from the boxes to prove he wasn't badly hurt. As his buckling knees hit the floor, the board Eddie had clutched simultaneously gave way, and down he went, his limbs banging against the chute's walls as he plummeted the remaining two-and-a-half stories, where he landed on a dilapidated wooden platform, which, giving way, helped break his fall.

Above, Vinnie careened backward, smashing against a box filled with outdated weightlifting devices. The spilling plates and bars clattered onto the warped, hardwood floor. Stunned, Vinnie whacked Clint's helping hands away and straightened the collar of his suit. "Get ya hands off; I'm fine. . . . The old man's as good as dead—now find him."

Angelo, a look of terror on his face, set down the box. "*Adios*, I'm a thief, *no mas*." With that, he sprinted out the door and back down the stairs.

Clint turned back to Vinnie. "He's not here. He must'a jumped out the window after he hit you."

Vinnie shuffled over to the window, still shaky in the knees, and peered out at the hard ground below. "If he jumped, he's got two broken legs for sure."

Down in the alleyway, Nurse's shopping cart was tucked out of sight behind the power box. She listened closely to Greg's report of what he'd seen and heard. Peeking out from her carpet-covered sanctuary, she stared up at Vinnie, hulking like a dark stone gargoyle in the open window. His grim specter cast a long shadow across the alley floor and up the filth-encrusted buildings opposite—buildings he'd soon tear down to make way for his own casino.

Stephanie slid a chair across the care center cafeteria's tiled floor, parking it close to an old woman. Her crippled hands rested on the arms of her wheelchair. A tattered book rested on her lap. A fringe of snow-white hair was flattened against the back of her gaunt head. She stared out through a pair of thick glasses, her gaze fixed upon the long row of windows at the far side of the room.

"Hello, Mrs. Russell," Stephanie called out in a loud voice. "How have you been?" The hunched old woman slowly turned and looked up, then beamed with joy at the sight of her visitor.

Mrs. Effie Russell raised a shaking hand—spotted with age and still adorned by an old-fashioned wedding band—and pointed at the window. "I've been sitting here looking out all evening, hoping you would come. You're such a sweet girl."

Stephanie reached down and stroked Effie's hand. "I love coming to see you."

The old woman brought her other hand over and rested it on the young woman's smooth arm. "Do you know . . . I can't even see the stars from the city lights. . . . I miss the stars."

"I know you do. . . ."

"I used to sit on the porch, waiting for Fred to come home from working on the dam. I could always see the stars then. . . . I wonder what's keeping Fred tonight . . ."

Stephanie smiled sadly. "Effie, Fred passed away 12 years ago, remember?"

"He did?" Effie, her back forming a question mark, sat in silence, waiting for the recollection to settle in.

Stephanie waited an instant, then said cheerfully, "I brought some

perfume. Would you like me to put some on for you?"

Effie raised her head and returned to the moment. "That would be real nice, dear. You always smell so good." The invitation accepted, Stephanie opened her hand bag, removed a small vial and unscrewed the lid. Effie's brow furrowed. "Now what was the name of that dam?"

"Hoover Dam." Stephanie gently rubbed each side of Effie's neck with her fingers.

"Herbert Hoover," Effie nodded, reaffixing it in her memory. "Will he be running for office again this year?"

"I don't think so."

"Probably for the best. It's been hard for Fred to make a living for us. . . . What's taking him so long tonight?"

"I'm not sure. Would you like me to read while we wait?"

Effie nodded, "I'd like that."

Stephanie stepped behind the old woman's wheelchair and glided her down the corridor toward her room. Through an open door, Maggie could be seen, brushing the hair of another elderly woman, pausing occasionally to touch her arm, smile, and respond to her comments.

"Which nightgown would you like to wear tonight?" Stephanie asked.

Effie thought. "The new pink one my mother bought me for my birthday. . . . My father bought me a book, too." The old woman's words were slow and frayed, but her tone was young and full of life. "*The Secret Garden*."

Stephanie placed the old book on the nightstand and helped Effie dress for bed. The young woman brushed Effie's fine, snowy locks, rubbed lotion on her hands and feet, pulled the covers down and positioned her near the bed. Effie bowed her head in prayer and offered up a prayer, a simple prayer of thanks and supplication. Then Stephanie helped her climb in and pulled the covers up.

"It's there on the dresser." Effie pointed at the worn, leatherbound book with its broken locking strap. "Read me the inscription in the front . . ." Her words trailed off, replaced by the distant remembrance of the words penned on the brittle pages.

Stephanie opened the book, its cover faded at the edges. She had almost memorized the tender words.

My Dearest Effie, You are growing to be such a beautiful young woman, now nine years old. I am proud of you and wish I could be at

home more often. Your mother tells me you are a great help with your new baby brother.

“George,” Effie whispered.

Stephanie continued. *I met this woman, Mrs. Burnett, on a train to New York. When she told me about her new book, I just had to buy you a copy. I hope you enjoy it. I’ll see you in a few months. Love, Daddy.*

The author’s inscription was dated April 28, 1912, and signed, *To Effie: Best wishes, Frances Hodgson Burnett.*

A single tear trickled down the crevasses of Effie’s aged face and disappeared into the branches of wrinkled skin. “I never saw him again. Ship sank on the way back from London.”

Waiting for the painful memory to fade, Stephanie turned to the bookmark. Each page clung to the ones on either side. They reminded Stephanie of fallen maple leaves stuck to a wet lawn. “Chapter 23, Magic,” she began. “*Dr. Craven had been waiting . . .*”

Some blocks away, Mitch, still perched in the darkness, was watching Bino fill out the end-of-day deposits, close out the credit card machine, hit the lights, lock up the booth, and limp across the parking lot in semi-darkness. He stopped to unlock the door to the Audi, then pulled out a cigarette to light up. The flame’s glow cast an eerie shadow across Bino’s normally friendly countenance.

Gripping the top of the fence, Mitch jumped up, gained a foothold on the rail, and vaulted over the chain-link barrier, landing just inches from the rattled Bino. “You set me up,” he screamed, getting up in the face of the two-bit fence, “didn’t you?” The cigarette tumbled from Bino’s lips and glanced off the side of the car, sending a tiny cascade of sparks onto the crumbling asphalt at Bino’s sandaled feet.

Bino stepped back, breathing hard, clutching desperately at his gaunt chest. Mitch clicked open the car door and helped his ex-friend sit down. “I want my car back, and you better not lie to me again.” Mitch held tightly to the nap of Bino’s shirt, waiting for a reply.

“You have . . . no clue . . . what you’re up against,” Bino finally blurted out.

“The odds’ve been stacked against me before.”

“They’ll kill me—and you too.”

“Not if I can help it. Who are *they*?”

Bino’s gaze fell. “I was an honest . . . gambler, up ‘til a year ago. . .

. Come from . . . a long line of cops. Guess you . . . could say I'm the . . . 'bad hand' of the family."

The gravity in Mitch's voice was evident. "Who are *they*?" he demanded again.

"Walk away, kid. . . . Take the loss . . . on the car. . . . Borrow the . . . money from your grandpa . . . and don't ever look back."

Mitch hauled Bino close. The words rose up from his throat in a prolonged, threatening growl. "Bino, *who are they?*"

"Listen . . . to what I'm tellin' ya' *Don't borrow money . . . from me—and don't take . . . Vinnie's job.*"

Mitch looked the washed-up gambler in the eye. Bino was afraid! Scared silly. And that was no bluff.

. . . They always called it Magic, and indeed it seemed like it in the months that followed—the wonderful months—the radiant months—the amazing ones. Oh! the things which happened in that garden!

Stephanie looked up from the yellowed pages. Effie was sound asleep. Her face was peaceful, her dreams floating in the sunshine of distant memories, clear and sweet.

FOURTEEN

MITCH ROUSED FROM a restless night's sleep. He'd driven to every hangout in town the previous night, hoping beyond hope to find his car. Stephanie rolled over to greet him, running her fingers through his tangle of blond hair. "What time'd you get finished?" she asked.

"Late . . ." he yawned, "but I found the problem. Shouldn't give you anymore trouble—for a while, at least."

Early-morning rays trickled through the bedroom blinds, their shafts turning his wife's flowing tresses into soft golden threads of light. Mitch lay still, tethered to the sight, basking in the moment. "You are *so* beautiful." He nuzzled his face in the shimmering strands, distracting himself from the glare of a guilty conscience. "Let's go get you some clothes."

"Not so fast, bud." She wriggled close and wrapped her long, slender leg around his.

Eddie's gym didn't open at its usual early hour. The small army of homeless friends had spent the night taking orders from Nurse. All had reported no unusual activity.

Ritter had come from his new home under I-15 and spent most of the night on the bench in front of American Biomedical. Smitty had taken over around 4:00 a.m., and was still at his post when Nurse checked in at 7:30. She'd brought someone along with her.

"Smitty, this here's a friend 'a mine." Though still swollen from sunburn, Greg was now dressed in acceptable attire. Nurse rambled on. "Fer now, least, goes by 'Sunny'. He's the one heard Eddie hollerin' for help. You already know Belle." Smitty grinned and blinked vigorously.

Today Greg noticed something different about the old woman. In contrast to her earlier behavior, she beamed with a strange confidence

he couldn't explain.

"Smitty's our resident lock-pick. Comes in handy now and again. Doesn't say nothin', but that don't mean he ain't smart." Nurse motioned down the street. "Smitty, can you go find Cap'n? Need him to take charge keepin' watch."

Smitty got up from the bench and ran his hand down the brown fuzz that clung in small clumps to his heavily scarred face. His body seemed suspended in air. He blinked his eyes, considering her request, then nodded in agreement. After massaging his patchy beard one more time, he pulled his thread-bare Yankees cap down low over his gangly eyebrows, hunkered down like a freight train, stuffed one thumb under his red suspenders, and set off on his disproportionately long legs.

"Not like Eddie to open so late, is it Belle?" The old woman cocked her ear to the side, listening, then gave a nod. "Belle says she thinks he's hurt, or maybe worse." The old woman fluttered a finger at Greg, then motioned to the bench. "Now you sit right here in the shade and keep track a who's comin' and goin'. Cap'n'll find a replacement, if'n he comes on duty." Nurse smacked her empty gums. "Belle and I 'll go'n rustle up some grub so your stomach don't eat a hole in yer backbone."

Greg took a seat and watched the morning unfold—totally oblivious to his own problems. Concerns that had seemed so monumental before now seemed so petty. His perspective had changed, perhaps from witnessing how his new friends were able to meet head-on the arduous task of living, and from seeing how deeply they cared for one another. Their burdens seemed heavy, yet they watched out for each other like family.

Twenty minutes later Nurse returned with a middle-aged man who wore a long-sleeve white shirt and a straw hat. A pasty layer of sun block was smeared over his nose. "Sound, here'll spell ya' off, Sunny. You just as well come an' meet Reverend Keller, seein' I got to go there to get some grub anyways." She took Greg by the hand and lifted him from the bench, then turned to Sound. "We'll be back in a couple hours. Keep an eye out, hear?"

The left side of the man's mouth drew up in an annoyed pout. "You don't need to tell me again. I already heard it three times."

Nurse shot him a patronizing glare and grunted through her loose lips, which seemed to rattle from the passing air.

“Okay, okay,” Sound apologized, collapsing onto the bench. “I’ll watch and keep track of anyone that comes or goes. . . . Just remember, I’ve got an appointment at 11:00.”

Greg struggled to keep up with Nurse as she scurried down Chandler Street. The open blisters on his skin scraped against his pants and shirt, a burning, stinging pain, like someone pouring sand in an open wound. “What’s the hurry . . .” he huffed, “and where’re we going?”

“Keller’s kitchen. Stops servin’ at eight.” She plowed along, paying no mind to his painful gait.

Stephanie, in stark contrast to her husband’s gloom, could be heard singing lullabies in the bathroom. Mitch stared distantly at the unopened credit application on the kitchen table. His fingers drummed at its battered surface. Where was his car? The bitter injustice of it all ate at his thoughts in the same way greedy alligators feed on a fresh carcass. Bino . . . he hated the lowlife—longed to punish him. A rat, a street-smart gambler educated by life’s hard knocks. These same traits, in fact, are what made him an even more feared opponent. And Vinnie . . . he’d gladly crush his skull. Mitch’s spiteful mind reeled in thought. At least things were starting to make a little sense, like the fact that Vinnie had made a special effort to scope out the GTO before ordering his thief to steal it.

His mind returned to the lanky gas-station chain-smoker. He’d mentioned the night before how he’d once been an honest gambler, and that his boss lent money. The likely conclusion was that Bino was stuck paying off a debt or two. Janice had in part confirmed the theory by explaining how he made it a point to ensure that the property he hawked was never hot.

The thought of two precious unborn children soon to be in his home finally squelched Mitch’s nagging desires for revenge. He stopped his finger-drumming and rested his heavy brow in his hand. It was time to tell Stephanie about the car—but not until they finished shopping. He wasn’t about to completely ruin her day, too.

“I’m ready,” Stephanie announced, coming from the bathroom. She picked up her purse and paycheck from the counter. “We need to stop at the bank.” She looked down at the application in Mitch’s hand. “Oh, that reminds me. The credit card company called just after you left last night. They approved your card. They just needed to verify your

social security number and mother's maiden name."

An alarm went off in Mitch's head. He hadn't applied for a new card. "Which company was it?"

"MasterCard, I think. . . . Is everything alright?"

Managing to keep his fury in check, Mitch nodded. "Yeah," he exhaled. "Let's go get those clothes."

He pulled the little Ford from the garage, climbed from the car and helped the garage door down. Then they set off.

Stephanie gazed out onto the lazy Saturday morning streets. "I've been thinking about names for the babies. Do you want to hear them?" She pulled the baby-name book from her purse. Names. . . . Mitch tried to join her in her excitement, but it was all in vain. The only name that kept ringing in his ears was that of Vincent Domenico.

The smell of blood was no stranger to Eddie. Now, the smell of blood—his own blood—together with pain, stirred him into consciousness. He concentrated on lifting his puffy eyelids. His right arm, pinned beneath him. Every part of him was stiff and sore. He was also suffering severe cramps, much like those he'd experienced five decades earlier when his appendix exploded during the miserable third round of a division title fight. His trainer had brushed off the pain as food poisoning, and insisted that he finish the bout.

Several toes felt oddly out of place. Wiggling them proved futile, the joints seemingly fused. The shooting pains in his shattered legs were like red-hot javelins that pierced the old man's knees, thighs, and back. Gliding a hand up his twisted spine, he found that he'd been speared by a shard of wood from the splintered landing.

When Eddie raised his left arm, he discovered that the entire right side of his body was cold and clammy, from where he'd felt the pinch before he fell. Recollection of his predicament was finally sinking in. Missing in action for going on twelve hours, he'd lay unconscious from a blow to the head and the effects of the spider venom—though minute—still ounce for ounce 15 times more powerful than that of a rattlesnake's.

The grizzled fighter labored to pry his other arm loose. His shallow breaths gave way to a nauseous wave of pressure building up in his stomach. He focused on breathing, but the nausea won out. A bilious flow inched up into his paralyzed voice box. It was futile to arrest the explosion. The warm river gushed down the front of his sweat-soaked t-shirt, joining with the

puddle of blood on the concrete floor.

When the heaves and subsequent dry heaves had subsided, he struggled to lean forward, but fell back from the stabbing pain in his kidneys. Eddie let his head loll sideways. He'd never imagined his final round would end like this: dying and disfigured, trapped at the bottom of a laundry chute, knocked cold by a black widow spider.

Cracked wheat cereal and oatmeal boiled in big silver pots, a worker hustling about keeping the table filled with food, donning oven mitts, she removed one of the steaming bowls and rushed out the door. Oven-like, the only thing in the kitchen that was cold was the milk and orange juice.

At the back of an adjoining gymnasium, the round, smiling face of a short man in his early fifties could be seen sticking up between two kettles. A wide band of shiny forehead extended up and over between his ears, which were bordered by short brown hair. His scalp practically glowed from the overhead lights that reflected down on it. Several dozen men were lined up at one side of a table. Calling each by name, this jolly elf slung the thick goo into bowls using giant spoons.

Reverend Bart Keller had been a plumber until age 45. He'd inherited his father's hair line and business at 40, but after five miserable years of managing employees, fighting unions, overseeing a fleet of vans, and calling upon hundreds of demanding contractors and homeowners, he'd sold out, kit and pipe-threaders, to one of his competitors at 50 cents on the dollar. Even so, a healthy wad of almost a million dollars would go a long ways. The very next day he'd bought the run-down church building on Stewart. He still claimed, after seven years, it was the best thing he'd ever done. He was paid half-a-million up front, most of which went to buying and fixing up the building. The balance, disbursed in tax free increments, was paid in charitable donations to the shelter over the next several years. This money, however, was now nearly exhausted.

He and his wife Renae lived in two rooms at the back of the building. They ate their meals in with their guests—his “friends” and “children,” he called them. The couple was never able to bear children of their own.

Nurse jostled Greg into line and cupped her crippled hand to her mouth to speak above the roar of vagrants. “That’s reverend ‘hind the pot,” she yelled. “Might be good if’n you had a word with him. Get whatever’s weighin’ you down off your hump.”

“What make’s you think something’s bothering me?” Greg called

back over the breakfast din.

“Just a feelin’.”

“No thanks.”

“We’ll see,” she muttered under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothin’. Get somethin’ to eat.”

The end of the line slowly crept up to the large aluminum pots, where Reverend Keller turned to Nurse. “Morning, Nurse. You too, Belle. Well, I see you brought a friend. . . . Oatmeal?”

Nurse nodded and stuck her thumb back over her shoulder. “This here’s the fella you sent the orange juice for other day. We call him Sunny.”

“Morning, Sunny . . . oatmeal or cracked wheat?”

Greg considered the options. He’d never cared for hot cereal—never even tried cracked wheat—but his stomach was caterwauling to be filled. “I’ll try the wheat.”

“Good choice; my personal favorite.” The corners of Reverend Keller’s mouth turned up, like a friendly elf, ever so slightly, exposing the dimples in his cheeks. His eyes, soft and inviting, seemed to look past Greg’s sun-burned exterior, beyond the whiskers and greasy hair, into his soul. “Nothing like a bowl of God’s whole grain to start a bright new day.” The spoon dipped into what was left of the mush and returned with a heaping portion. “A little brown sugar and milk on that, you’ll think you’re in heaven.”

Following Nurse, Greg moved quickly to the low table nearby, sprinkled out a spoonful of brown sugar and picked up a paper cup of milk. He and Nurse then took seats at a table set off from the others. The last few stragglers that had wandered in behind Greg filled their bowls and found seats.

“Got enough chow for a few to have seconds if you want,” the reverend hollered.

Nurse shoved a heaping spoonful of oatmeal in her mouth and squirmed in her seat, looking out the corner of her eye. “I know, I know,” she whispered, speaking from the side of her mouth. “I seen him already.”

Greg stirred some milk into his cereal. “Who?”

“Belle’s just a worry wart, ‘s all.”

“Who’s she worried about?”

“Nothin’. Ain’t no need nobody gettin’ riled up.” Nurse’s eyes followed a man who was making his way toward the chow line. The guy was your regular tramp, except he wore some nice designer slacks and an expensive—though dingy—shirt. On his feet were a pair of scuffed, name-brand

shoes.

Greg craned his neck to see who she was staring at, then turned back to take his first bite of cereal. Stopping short of putting it in his mouth, he swivelled around, mouth agape, and cried out, "He's wearing my clothes!"

Reverend Keller shook the last remnant of oatmeal in the fellow's bowl, then dropped the spoon in the pan. Nurse had told the reverend how she'd found Greg, and everyone knew that this guy—fittingly, 'Finders' was his street name—had cashed in an expensive watch at the local pawn shop.

Greg rose from his chair and started toward the man. No contest—embroidered initials on the shirt sleeves was easily enough to condemn the clothes thief.

Sensing trouble, his short legs chugging like the little red train that could, Reverend Keller, the driving force of a steam engine behind him, rounded the table to intercede. "Sunny," he said, extending his stout arm over Greg's shoulder and turning him on his heels. "How's the wheat?"

"I, I . . ." Greg stuttered as he pointed in Finders' direction.

"I've got something you might be looking for," the reverend said. He lifted the mush-specked apron from his spherical belly and leaned sideways to allow his hand to fit into his pocket. Easing Greg down into a chair, he extracted something and pulled up a chair of his own.

From his seat, Greg couldn't help but give the shoes on Finder's feet a passing glance as the man sat back down at his table. Resisting the arm that yet rested on his shoulder, he started to say, "But he's wearing . . ."

". . . previously owned clothes, just like you and me." The reverend laid a finger to his lips. Greg ran his hand through his too-long hair to pull it from his eyes. He'd been two months now without a haircut, a week without a bath. Finally he looked down at what Reverend Keller had resting in his palm. A gold Rolex. Keller spoke quietly. "Tell me the inscription on the back and it's yours."

Greg slumped in embarrassment. It had been a birthday gift from his wife. They were still in love then, ten years ago. Crazy about each other, in fact. Linda had skimped and saved, taken on odd sewing jobs, baby sat neighbor kids and kids from their church to save enough money to buy it. Those days were difficult—and wonderful at the same time. No money, no worries. Still in college, came and went as they pleased. Long hours of work and a tiny two-room apartment and a new baby on the way—pure heaven. "To G.H., forever yours. With love, L.H." Greg mumbled.

Reverend Keller lowered his head to catch Greg's eye. "I didn't quite

hear that last part.”

Greg met the gaze of the man sitting next to him, looked deep into those caring brown eyes at his own shabby reflection. “To G.H., forever yours,” he repeated more loudly. “With love, L.H.”

“I thought so.” The reverend handed over the watch.

“Thought what?”

“You know—you’ve just forgotten. . . .” Nurse peered over, bits of oatmeal at the corners of her mouth, and smiled. Greg almost smiled back.

“So, Sunny, what do you do for a living?” the reverend asked, his voice taking on a more serious tone.

“Uh, computers. . . . I was a computer software and programming executive.”

“Maybe you can return the favor. I’ve got a computer giving me trouble.”

Greg slipped the watch on over the bright red ring on his sunburned wrist. In corresponding fashion, he subconsciously twisted at the tight wedding band on his finger. It, too, had a similar inscription, though he hadn’t read it for years. The extra weight he’d put on had locked it tight—just not tight enough to keep a marriage together. “I’ll be glad to take a look,” he finally said.

“Great. Now finish your wheat before it gets cold.” He wiped his hands on the front of his apron. “See you in ten minutes.”

Nurse swept her mouth with the front of her hand and wiped it on her dress. “Told you,” she said. “Reverend’s got a gift. Says he gets help from higher up. Can look right into yer heart and see what makes ya’ tick. ‘Fore ya’ know what hit ya’, you’ll be ‘fessin’ up an’ lightenin’ ‘nother’s load.” Nurse stood and gulped the last of her milk. “I’ll meet ya’ back at Eddie’s. Meantime, I best see if Smitty found Cap’n.”

The makeshift cafeteria was nearly empty now. Only Greg remained sitting; a few others chatted near the exit. All at once, a huge man, legs like pillars and a huge droopy sack of wheat for a gut, bolted from the kitchen carrying a dirty ladle. “You!” he thundered, striding up and pointing his weapon in Greg’s face. Taken aback, Greg stayed put, not daring to move. Satisfied with the frightened man’s response, the white-aproned man, having spied the others ducking for cover, gave chase. “You and you and you,” he pointed, ordering the last three people out the door to follow him. Pointing once more at Greg, he barked, “You,

start on tables.”

Greg, a panicked look on his face, looked to Reverend Keller for help. The reverend dropped his apron on the table and said, “He’ll be helping me today, Cook.”

The big man—known by all simply as “Cook”—then turned his wrathful stare on the other unlucky three. “You,” he pointed to a thin woman, “start on the tables. You,” he pointed at another wide-eyed patron, “wipe down and mop the kitchen. . . . You, you sweep the hall. . . .” With that, he turned and stomped back into the kitchen.

Reverend Keller shrugged apologetically and looked at Greg. “He’s harmless. His friendly tail’s a whole lot worse than his bark. A little intimidating, is all, until you get to know him.”

Greg glanced in the direction of the kitchen, where the big drill-sergeant cook could still be heard giving orders. “If you say so.”

“He keeps up his guard to protect himself—hides his feelings. Not unlike the rest of us.” The reverend guided Greg into a side office, piled high with papers. Even with the door closed, Greg could still plainly hear Cook’s brusque voice. *What kind of feelings could he be hiding?* he thought.

Apparently Reverend Keller felt the need to explain what had just happened. “Cook served in Nam. All I know is not a single one of his friends came back with him.” Then he turned his attention to the misfiring PC. “That’s it,” he said, referring to a keyboard and monitor on the desk. “The only thing I still own that tries my patience. Torments me, to be more accurate. Possessed by some sort of cyber-demon. I’m afraid my own prayers and faith aren’t strong enough to fix it.”

The man’s good humor brought a smile to Greg’s lips. He flipped the switch. “I don’t know anybody that prays for their computer. You ever have anybody look at it?”

“Nope, just figured I wasn’t praying hard enough.”

Greg wagged his head. *Was this guy serious? Did he really think prayers could fix it?* “What does it do?”

“Dies. I’ll be right in the middle of whatever and the damn thing dies. Oops—don’t usually take to cursing. It’s just this machine, and a few of my old habits. Used to be a plumber. Nothing quite like laying under a sink full of dirty water while it drips on your face. Or messing with somebody else’s used toilet paper. Or getting your arm stuck up a toilet while trying to pull out a rubber duck. I worked in sewer water,

see? Couldn't help but get a little on me now and then. The cursing was a daily thing—an outward manifestation of my inner frustrations, being stuck in my fathers business, and all. The worst part was that my dad died before I realized why we didn't get along as good as we should have. Even sadder, after he died and I told my mother, she told me he only kept the business for me. That really took the cake. . . . How about you? Have a family?"

Greg nodded as he typed in his first command. "Two children, a boy and a girl. My son, Devin, is 10; Larine's eight."

"See them often?"

"It's been over three weeks."

"I'll bet you miss them."

Greg swallowed hard and typed in several more commands. "It's my own fault."

"I know what you mean. I sometimes wonder if I should've had someone come and take a look at this computer sooner. . . ." The reverend's broad smile narrowed. "Your wife?"

"Linda. . . she filed for divorce more than a month ago."

"Sorry to hear that. . . . You know, I'll bet if I'd had had some help on this blasted machine when it first started giving me problems, it wouldn't have driven me to swearing."

Greg scanned through the various startup commands, bios and autoexec.bat files, wondering where the strange conversation was going. "I don't see anything wrong. When does it usually give you trouble?"

"Sometimes it just didn't respond when I moved the mouse." He leaned across the desk and gave the mouse a shake. "The first time I noticed a real problem was when I was writing a love note to my wife. I had it half finished and got sidetracked. When I came back, the machine was frozen up. I never did get back to finishing my note."

Greg rifled through the computer's sleep program, its temp files, the recycle bin, and every other place he could think to look. "It could be in the hard drive. I just can't see anything wrong."

"Maybe if you open up the word processor and type awhile. That's when it usually gives me grief. I'll go help with the dishes." Reverend Keller pulled away from the desk and left the office.

Taking the suggestion to heart, Greg opened the program and, out of habit, typed in a simple nursery rhyme he'd written. As a programmer, he'd used it many times over as test text.

My little Devin came down from heaven.
An angel child from God.
To fill my heart, make joy in part . . .

He paused. He couldn't recall the rest of the rhyme. Rolling to the side, he peered out the office door. The reverend was still in the kitchen. He leaned back in the chair and snapped the watch from his wrist to read the inscription on the back. He ran his thumb over the indented letters, words once so lovingly etched that now had given way to mistrust and malice. The cloudy reflection staring back was no longer the same man those tender words had been meant for.

Shaking his head in despair, Greg lay the watch on the table, placed his fingers on the keyboard, and began to type.

My dearest Linda,

It's the silliest thing. I'm sitting at a reverend's office desk at a soup kitchen for the homeless. After somehow returning to me the stolen watch you gave me years ago, the reverend asked me if I could find out what is wrong with his computer. You will probably never see this letter, nor will anyone else, but he says the machine only gives him trouble when he's typing. Therefore, I type.

A breath of air slowly escaped Greg's lips. He'd never apologized to her, not the way he should have. The pain she'd bottled up had slipped from her lips in the form of angry words—deserved reproof for his deception.

Oh, Linda, I was a fool. My selfishness and stupidity cost me everything I own, nearly including my life, which I would gladly give to have you back.

Greg daubed at his eyes and leaned to see if anyone was watching before continuing his heartfelt missive.

If I could have the wish of my heart, I'd turn back the hands of time to the day you gave me this beautiful watch. I'd start anew, loving you, being sensitive to your needs, guarding your tender feelings, never allowing the ugly sands of deceit to filter into the hourglass of your heart, living our lives to the fullest.

I'd return to a time when poverty brought us together, when the car we drove was only a means of transportation rather than a symbol of my achievements. My most treasured possessions are and always have been you and our family, not things. But I let them get in the way . . .

"So, did you find the problem, or do I need to pray harder than

ever?”

Greg recoiled at the sound of the reverend’s voice. He’d been too caught up in thought.

Embarrassed by the private words lit up on the screen, he ran the cursor up, hit delete, and wiped at his cheek. Reverend Keller could read between the lines of human emotion; his years in the ministry had taught him well to read people, and their feelings. The man sitting at his desk was hurting. He turned his back and gently eased the door shut. When the few critical seconds had passed in silence, he spoke. “I’ve met a lot of people that live on the street. They come here to get a decent meal. Most have no other place to go. . . . Sunny, when you’re ready to talk, I’m here to listen.”

Greg pushed back, stood, and scooted the chair back under the desk. He motioned to the humming computer. “There’s nothing wrong with it, is there?”

The reverend shook his head. “But if there was, I’d need help to fix it. Hope, prayers, wishing, they wouldn’t be enough.”

FIFTEEN

BY TEN THIRTY GREG HAD returned to the front of the biomedical center and relieved Sound from duty. Sitting on the bench, he thought of Reverend Keller and the way he had spoken in such an odd parable. The words had caused Greg deep reflection ever since. How could he hope to have his family and life back without putting forth any real effort? The notion of fixing a computer problem by prayer alone was ridiculous. And prayer, as powerful as it may be, wasn't the only thing lacking in Greg's life, by far. He needed to *do* something, *work* it out. Yet it all seemed so overwhelming.

During his watch, Greg kept a close look-out on the gym down the street. Around noon, Clint arrived, and opened the door to let in a few die-hard weightlifters. The staff in the basement weren't expected to return until Monday morning, and the metal door leading downstairs was dead-bolted tight.

Shortly after, Cap'n arrived, introducing himself with a fierce handshake and deep voice. Despite the climbing temperature, he wore an ill fit Desert Storm military-issue coat with captain's bars sown to each shoulder. Sweat ran profusely down the big black man's face and over his skunk-striped beard, dripping like rain on the front of his soaked camouflaged shirt.

Greg discretely wiped the sweaty handshake on his "previously-owned" pants and introduced himself.

"So, you're Sunny. Nice to meet you!" Cap'n boomed. Then he pulled a strap from his shoulder, lifted a two and a half-gallon cooler above his mouth, tilted back his wide head and gulped the splashing water down his hollow throat. Half of it leaked from the corners of the man's mouth and onto his belly. "Hotter n' hadies today, ain't it," he said, after drinking what seemed like an entire lake-full.

Greg agreed with a curious smile. All at once, Cap'n let loose with an "Oh!" Pulling the strap back over his shoulder, he dragged a well-

used plastic cup from his jacket pocket and lowered it to the spout, filling it to the brim.

"Forgive my rudeness . . . Should'a served you first."

Greg took the cup and peered over its edge. Nothing swimming inside—so he pressed it to his lips. The ice-cold water felt good on his parched tongue. "Thanks," he said, returning the cup.

"Think nothin' of it. Nurse says you need to get some rest now." Cap'n glanced over at the building, looked up and down the street, then bent closer to Greg's ear. "That's a hint that your watch is over 'til morning." His thick lips twitched and he spoke out the side of his mouth. "Glad to have you in the unit. Good 'cruits are hard to come by these days."

The sound of the red Ferrari turned both men's heads in the direction of the sports car pulling up in front of the gym. Vinnie revved the engine before shutting it off, climbing from the car and circling onto the curb. The picture of cool, he was dressed in a pair of casual, almond-colored slacks and a collared, two-tone, short-sleeved shirt. The only evidence that he wasn't the ultra-smooth customer he imagined himself to be was the splotchy, purplish bruise at the base of his chin.

With a beep and a flash of the lights, Vinnie dropped the keys in his pocket, adjusted his expensive sunglasses in the reflection of the tinted window, and disappeared inside Eddie's place.

Greg took two steps toward the gym. "I think I'll go take a look around inside."

The rattle of an ice-filled cooler, the slap of boots on concrete, and the swish of heavy fabric behind him, and Cap'n had cut off Greg's path. "Not without orders, Private." His voice was stern.

Greg looked up in the scowling face of the giant man. "Excuse me, *sir*," he murmured. "I'd like to *volunteer* for the reconnaissance mission."

Cap'n's nod was hardly noticeable, "Report back immediately upon completion." He stepped aside and pointed the way.

The half-block trek past the alley to the gym took scarcely 30 seconds. Greg stopped and nonchalantly leaned up against the wall, just inches away from the partially open door. The smell of swamp cooler and locker room blew past him through the narrow crack. Through the wire-encased glass, Greg could see the large ebony-skinned trainer, bent over a bench-pressing weightlifter. Then, from around the alley

corner came racing two pre-teen boys, almost knocking Greg down. The lead boy jostled past and through the doorway ahead of the other.

“Hey, Ty,” he said boldly, the moment he burst into the weight room, “where’s Pops?”

The second boy waited for Greg to step aside, and strolled in, with Greg close on his heels.

Inside the near-empty gym, Ty looked up from spotting a heavy load of weights. “Don’t know, Luke. Haven’t seen him all morning. Go see if he’s still asleep.”

Luke raced down the darkened corridor to the farthest door and banged on it with his fist. Receiving no response, he went to the end of the hall and shoved open the outside metal door to see if the old pickup sat in its usual spot. Returning to the studio door, he yelled, “Hey, Pops, you in there?” No answer. He banged again, then turned the knob to peek inside.

A paltry, smoked-glass window above a narrow sink threw a faint, gray tinge on the room. Small cupboards, painted a brownish-yellow color, lined the wall on each side. A shabby fridge sat to one side. An unkempt single bed filled the opposite wall, shoved up against an antique nightstand, cluttered with books. Scores of books on the floor, piled high, lined the somber walls. The old man’s apartment wasn’t much better than the homeless shelter where he and his mother lived.

Faded and yellowing, dozens of black-and-white photos in dusty, outdated frames blanketed the walls. Luke stepped close and stared at one of the pictures, where a young champion hoisted above his head in one hand a glittering trophy; in the other, he clutched a title belt with its gaudy buckle facing the camera. A wide smile and confident eyes made the young fighter look rather cocky. The same young man stood in other photos. In some he was arm in arm with a beautiful young woman; in others he had his arm around a child. Some of the photos were of an older man with a curled mustache—definitely Eddie—together with a handsome young boy about the same age as Luke, who likewise held a trophy and a belt, and gave off a grin as wide as the crescent trim on the belt’s buckle.

“He there?” Luke heard Ty yell from the weight room up front.

Luke cast his eyes around the room one more time. Then he sauntered back into the hall and back to the mirrored weight room. “Nope, can’t find him nowhere.”

Out by the gym's entrance, Greg lingered by the door. His casual preoccupation with the building, its metal door and alarm system, drew the attention of the only man who would care, and he was becoming more irritated by the minute.

"What do you need?" Ty finally demanded, confronting the shabby, bothersome man, hands on hips.

"Just looking for Eddie. Is he in?"

"Haven't seen him all morning. Try back later." Enough said, Ty, with Luke shadowing him, went back to spotting the heavy load suspended over the chest of his client. "Just two more—come on, push!"

In spite of his not being all that welcome, Greg stayed put. Luke, curious and a little bored, gave Greg the once over, then turned and bounded up the stairs. At the top of the balcony, he paused at Clint's office before crouching on his hands and knees. He'd sneaked past the office once or twice before to check out the antique equipment in the storage room down the hall, and wondered if Eddie might be there.

"He hasn't been here all morning," Clint's voice blared from beneath the closed door.

"I want the old codger dead." Luke didn't recognize the other voice.

"He's an old man. If he wanted to go to the cops he'd have gone months ago. . . . Back off; I'll find him. He's got no place else to go."

Meanwhile, Greg, still at his post by the front door, saw a tattered woman approaching on the sidewalk outside, with two black eyes, a cut lip and multiple bruises on her skinny arms. For such a young woman she'd already lived a hard life. She stopped at the door and took hold of its wrought-iron handle. Greg moved to help with the heavy, rusty-hinged door. The woman lowered her eyes and offered thanks, before sheepishly stepping around him. She glanced about the room, seemingly embarrassed by the nearly naked bodies of the muscle-bound men who grunted and preened in front of the mirrors. Then she spied the second boy who had come in with Luke—a boy who bore a striking resemblance to her. Scowling, she marched up and quietly scolded him for leaving her so far behind. The boy apologized, explaining he'd only wanted to talk with Eddie. The woman put a knuckle to her forehead and pressed, the clear sign of a headache. Pulling at her son's shirt, she told him they'd come back another time. Greg could tell by the look in the kid's face he wanted to argue, but reluctantly obeyed. Together they trudged out the door.

Greg followed after them. As he did, he thought of his own son, together with the questions from Wyatt, the young man from the restroom. No, he'd never beaten his wife or son. And now, yes, he missed them terribly—and wondered if they'd ever take him back.

After five different stores, six new outfits, an almost-empty wallet and one aching back, Mitch was ready to call it quits. His ten-buck wristwatch read three o'clock. The time had dragged along. He'd never been one for shopping, but knew how much Stephanie enjoyed it. With his hands clasped behind his head, he leaned back in the plush chair outside the dressing room, tapped his foot up and down, and watched Stephanie's feet and ankles under the dressing room door.

"We need to do this more often, Stef," he called out under the opening. "I never knew pregnant women could be so sexy."

Stephanie peeked over the top of the door. She pressed a finger to her lips. "Shhh!" She was blushing. A very pregnant woman nearby, sorting through a rack of tops, looked up with a smile. Clearly she'd overheard the compliment.

"Let 'em look. *My* beautiful wife's pregnant with twins," he announced in a semi-loud voice.

"Mitchell Wilson, I mean it! I'll be too embarrassed to come out."

Mitch grinned from ear to ear and raised his eyebrows in a teasing gesture. When Stephanie finally did emerge, the woman at the rack inched over to ask about the twins. By an unlikely coincidence, she too was expecting a double delivery.

Mitch let out a sigh as the two women, instant soul mates, launched in on what he could tell would be a long discussion, comparing their pregnancies. Now look what he'd done—he and his big mouth. He settled back in the chair. It'd be at least another fifteen minutes.

Luke prowled about the high-ceilinged storage room, too afraid to venture past Clint's office. He'd previously been the victim of the temperamental man's stern lectures, and wasn't about to get caught snooping where he didn't belong—especially after hearing a conversation that included the words "cops" and "killing."

He crept to the window. Out in the alleyway he saw his new friend walking away with his battered mother. Luke jumped quietly up and down in an attempt to catch their attention. In the process, his foot

knocked a single pipe off a nearby box, which, in turn, rolled across the floor and bumped the base of a weight bar leaning against the window sill. As the top of the bar pitched in a sweeping arc across the wall, it fell onto a pile of metal weights stacked precariously in the corner. To Luke, gazing on in horror, the slow-motion scene seemed to go on forever, though it lasted only a few seconds.

The falling weights spilled and clattered onto the floor, chiming and shaking like church bells pealing during a summer thunderstorm. Then the room fell silent. Luke hunkered low and scooted across the floor, wishing a bolt of lightning would strike him dead before the two men in the next room came and found him cowering against the far wall.

Deep in the dank recesses of the building, Eddie stirred from his semi-conscious sleep. A roll of distant thunder echoed down the laundry chute, reminding him of his desperate situation. His pulse had slowed to a feeble beat. Drops of perspiration streamed from every pore. Each feverish tremor shot a dagger of pain through his punctured back.

Exerting his last bit of energy, he groped through the rubble strewn over and around his shattered legs. At last he was able to pull a short board from the debris. Raising it with his good arm, and with as little movement as possible, he began tapping the wall in a rhythmic S.O.S.

Meanwhile, several stories above, Luke's young chest felt heavy and his stomach churned with fear. Footsteps sounded outside the door to the storage room. It opened cautiously, and in walked Clint, Vinnie right behind. "The old man has my piece," Vinnie warned.

"He won't shoot us. He's a fighter, but he doesn't have a mean bone in his body," Clint assured. "Look, it's only a pile of weights. He must have knocked them loose when he jumped out the window last night."

"Don't matter. I'm sendin' some people to move the operation tonight. You tell me if he shows."

"Vinnie, he's an old man," Clint pleaded.

"You tell me—or I'll do you, too." Vinnie raised his trigger finger to deal his underling a threatening poke.

With lightning-fast reflexes, Clint caught Vinnie by the arm, raised the pointed finger to his own lips, and blew, as if puffing away smoke from the tip of a gun. "Do what?" Clint's jaw tightened. "Kill everyone that doesn't agree? This is *my* town now. Get that straight, Vinnie.

I know more hard cases here than you ever even met back in Jersey—so does the old man. You kill him or me, and they find out, you'll never make it out of town alive."

Vinnie yanked his arm free. "He's *your* responsibility! They come lookin' for me, you're dead. . . ."

Still glaring warily at one another, both men stalked out the door and pulled it closed behind them. Luke—hardly breathing, petrified yet still alive, and still hugging the wall on the far side of the room—wished he hadn't heard what he'd just heard. He'd give anything to be far away just then, away from the gym, away from it all. Easing himself to his feet, he wondered what the tapping sound was that seemed to vibrate up through the walls.

Mitch and Stephanie started for home. Beaming with joy at her selections, she patted him on the thigh. "You were a good sport to come today."

"My pleasure. What do you say we go see Grandpa. We haven't even told him about our babies."

"Great. I was thinking the same thing. If we look hungry enough, maybe he'll make us some of his 'junkyard dog stew' for supper."

Mitch smiled, remembering Stephanie's first visit to the junkyard. For a long time he'd been careful to keep her away, afraid the upper-class girl would find out where he came from and blow him off, a scared cat running from the rowdy junkyard dog. She'd asked dozens of times to meet this infamous grandpa of his. Ashamed more of where he lived than of the grouchy old man, he'd asked Grandpa several times to come to a restaurant and meet her. Grandpa had always refused. "If she's scared off see'n who you are and who I am," he'd say, "she ain't worth a pile a dog crap anyway."

The night she finally met the cantankerous old fellow was a near disaster. In a weak moment, Mitch had promised Stephanie they'd swing by and meet him after a movie. Even though he'd had second thoughts later that night, she'd held him to his promise.

When they pulled up to the single-bedroom trailer, parked on blocks and situated behind the run-down service station, Mitch studied her face. She was aware of his trepidation and the embarrassment he might feel, and had carefully weighed her words. "It can't be as bad as you make it out to be." Mitch was afraid that, indeed, it was.

He slithered through the doorway first, hoping to shield his steady girl from any particularly unseemly spectacle. But it was not to be. Grandpa was seated on his easy chair, his feet propped up on a greasy footrest. Before he had seen Stephanie, he blurted out, "Hell's bells, boy, you home so early? What's 'a matter, had a spat with the royalty?"

He'd always resented his son for being ashamed of where he came from, and now his grandson was doing the same thing. Somehow he'd always assumed he could blame the problem on their friends rather than his own flesh and blood.

"No . . . Pa," Mitch had stammered, "I—I brought her to meet you."

The old man was so embarrassed by his statement, he couldn't even apologize. Stephanie, sensing the silent arrows of anger radiating between the men, politely introduced herself. She tried breaking the tension by inquiring what smelled so good. "Stew," the old man had said, still stunned by the exchange. Then he'd wiggled the toothpick in his teeth and fled the room to fetch them both a bowl of the homemade concoction.

Stephanie found the stew to be delicious, that is until Mitch went into the other room to put the empty bowls in the sink. Again trying to be polite, Stephanie had remarked, "The stew was very good," and then asked, "What kind of meat did you use?"

"Junkyard dog," Grandpa had exclaimed in his typically gruff way.

Knowing he was trying to push her buttons, Stephanie had responded, "Well, sir, that's the best damn junkyard dog I ever ate!"

The gruff response was just what the old man needed to put away his prejudice. Boisterous laughter met Mitch upon his return. Stephanie's howls were passionate and genuine; Grandpa's crotchety old face was glowing. Before long, they were all laughing at Grandpa's stories about Mitch when he was little. Some of the tales were rather mortifying—to Mitch, at least: others were relatively tame. One story told how the stew's name originated. When Mitch was three, one of Grandpa's guard dogs he kept on the lot had disappeared. The old hound—named Butch, as Grandpa remembered it—had probably gone out to a far corner of the yard, laid down and died. But little Mitch was too smart for that. Several times he'd been out hunting with Grandpa, and he knew where meat came from: it came from animals. So, while studying the stew they were eating that night, he was sure it was from that old missing dog. Needless to say, the "junkyard dog stew" label

stuck.

At the end of that first visit, Grandpa had given Mitch a slap on the back and said, “Mighty fine woman, boy. You hang on to her—she just might help you get outta this old junkyard.”

Now, years later, they were once more on their way to see him. Mitch turned to his bride and put his hand on her thigh. “Mighty fine woman,” he chuckled.

Luke waited until he was sure Clint had left the building and the Ferrari had rumbled from the curb before making his way back downstairs. According to Clint’s conversation, Eddie had jumped out the window. *Nurse’ll know where he is*, thought the boy as he raced to the alley.

Eddie stopped tapping and drifted back into a mind-numbing stupor. Trying to escape the pain, he once again drifted into the past—to better days, to his beautiful bride sitting in the rocking chair in front of a fireplace, her curly hair flowing down her bosom to where she held their new baby girl, nursing at her mother’s breast.

“You can do it,” were some of the last words she ever said to him. “It doesn’t matter how bad they try to scare you. . . . You do your best to bring that belt home, but, win or lose, make sure you come home with your integrity intact.” Afterwards, she had given him a tender kiss and a soft pat on the rear. He’d turned to leave, then wheeled back and bent down to kiss the velvety forehead of their newborn.

This calming vision faded, and his mind jumped ahead to one of his worst days, to the day when his appendix had burst. He’d won the title that day, over sixty years earlier. He’d refused to take a fall, ignoring the threats of a Chicago crime boss not willing to lose a bet. The police had met him in the locker room after the win, solemn-faced, heads lowered. Two of their best officers, veterans who’d been left to guard Eddie’s wife and daughter, had taken the fall for that title round. Somehow the infant daughter had survived.

“Nurse, you in there?” Luke hollered from near the power-box.

Greg sat up from his restless nap. The young voice seemed a faint echo of the night before.

“Nurse, it’s Luke—Eddie’s friend.”

Greg pulled back the carpet, peering squinty-eyed into the alley.

“She’s not here.”

“Where is she? Has she seen Pops? I been lookin’ for him.” Luke knew of Nurse and Eddie’s long friendship, that Eddie had taken rolls of tape and other food and medical items to her over the last few months. If Eddie was hurt by the fall, she’d know where he was.

“Isn’t he inside?”

Luke recognized Greg as the man from the doorway. “You one of Nurse’s friends?”

Greg inched from the concrete shelter. “She calls me Sunny. . . .”

An hour north of Vegas, Mitch pulled the car off the freeway and down a gravel road to a bridge. A few blocks further, the road dead-ended into a cluttered, seemingly abandoned service station piled high with wrecked vehicles and car parts. Five angry dogs—teeth bared, tails straight up in the air, yelps piercing the wind—lit out from the open door of the station. When they reached the little Ford, they greeted it in their customary way, viciously attacking the vehicle’s front tires.

Without hesitation, Mitch stepped out and began shouting out names like a roll call to the mass of teeth and fur. The untrained mob of mongrel flesh turned from the tires like a frantic pack of hungry wolves and made for Mitch, who knelt to greet his furry friends. Each dog, in turn, rank and order, either turned belly-up for a good rubdown, or jumped to lick the face of their youthful, more spirited master.

Stephanie remained behind closed doors as Mitch turned, the dogs trailing him, barking excitedly, and walked inside and closed the station door.

A surly voice came from the station. “Who in tarnation’s harassin’ my dogs?”

“The only man who loves ‘em more than you,” Mitch called out.

There was a chuckle, followed by, “After three weeks, you better not be comin’ ‘round here ‘less you brought Stef with you, boy.” A tall, lean man with bushy eyebrows, a two-day growth of white whiskers and a full head of white hair emerged from the back room, wiping his rough, oily hands with a soiled rag.

“I’ll take her back, if you’re going to be an ol’ grouch,” Mitch retorted, spreading his arms wide. The men embraced. Mitch hugged the old man tight, despite the risk of grease from his coveralls.

The old man unzipped the coveralls and struggled to pull them from

his shoulders. "Gimme a hand. Don't want to get 'er dirty."

With a growl from their elderly master, the mongrels were ordered to stay inside the station, away from Mitch's young bride with her terrible fear of dogs—especially large, savage ones. Grandpa Wilson, old and stiff from three-quarters-of-a-century's hard work, limped with a quickened pace toward his one-and-only favorite granddaughter-in-law. Stephanie popped the lock and climbed from the car.

"Land sakes, you beautiful girl," exclaimed Grandpa Wilson, reaching out to her take her in his arms. Stephanie noticed his hug was a little more tender than usual. "Been thinkin' about you all week, wonderin' when you'd drag this man of yours up here to see me. Even put a pot o' junkyard dog on this mornin', hopin' you'd come."

"Grandpa, we missed you. How are you feeling?"

"For cryin' out loud, we don't wanna talk about me. Tell me about the little one." One arm still wrapped around her shoulder, he circled the forefinger of his other hand in front of Stephanie's not-yet-distended belly and escorted her toward the trailer.

Stephanie flashed Mitch a questioning glance over her shoulder. He shrugged and wiped his hands together as if to cleanse himself of all responsibility.

"How did you know I'm pregnant?" Stephanie asked.

"My stars, girl, a man who can't see that glow hoverin' over a woman as beautiful and happy about it as you, got to be downright blind. Now, come take off your shoes. Been doin' a bit a' readyin' for the new arrival."

The three of them climbed the wooden steps to the trailer porch and slipped their shoes off outside the door. Mitch looked on in amazement. Stephanie gasped, "It's beautiful, Grandpa."

The inside of the home had been completely refurbished. New carpet, a bright coat of new paint, brand-new furniture throughout. "Been twenty-two years since we had a little one runnin' around the place. Figured it was time to fix 'er up for my first great-grandchild. Don't want 'im playing in the grease now, do we?"

Stephanie's eyes began to tear up. "That's so thoughtful. . . ."

"Glory be, girl, you can't be goin' off cryin', now, or you'll make an old man cry." Grandpa gently took Stephanie by the hand.

Mitch cleared his throat. "You know, Grandpa, we've got some doubly good news." Struggling to contain his own emotions, he paused.

This was a magical moment, one to remember. “We’re having twins—a boy and a girl.”

Grandpa threw up his hands. “Now you done it,” his voice quavered. “. . . You . . . the *four* a’ you—you gone and made me cry.” Still holding onto Stephanie’s hand, he reached up with his opposite sleeve and wiped his eyes. “Haven’t got a clue what’s happenin’ to me . . . in my old age. Must be gettin’ soft or somethin’.”

Stephanie couldn’t help but sob between laughs. “M—Maybe *you’re* pregnant!”

The old man waved Mitch close and embraced them both. This truly was heaven on earth. “I think it just took me seventy-five years to figure out what’s most important in life,” he smiled. “And they’re right here in my arms.”

SIXTEEN

NURSE ONCE AGAIN SENT for Cap'n, who'd been off duty since 4:00 p.m. When he arrived, the small patrol of vagrants met in the dark alley behind Eddie's old truck and huddled around like a grade-school football team drawing up their next play.

"Accordin' t' what Sunny says, Luke told 'im Clint and Mister Vinnie think Eddie jumped outta the second-story window. Sunny was here watchin'. Says Eddie stayed inside." Nurse turned to Greg, who nodded in return. "Means he got t' be inside somewheres. . . . Now, ever'boday knows who Mister Vinnie is, right?"

A puzzled look crossed Greg's face. "Who's he?" The focus of every teammate turned to the new kid on the block.

"For the love o' soup, soldier!" Cap'n exclaimed. "You don't know Mister Vinnie?"

Nurse was quick to defend the newcomer. "Easy, Cap'n, he's only been out a few days."

"That's right. You's a tender new recruit," Cap'n said with a playful barb. "Most everyone knows who Mister Vinnie is. You give your blood at American Bio Medical, get fifteen bucks. Find a credit card application, it's worth seventy-five. Work as a pigeon, make a hundred. Don't matter which store you stop at on this block, it's Mister Vinnie's money." Greg didn't have a clue what Cap'n was talking about.

Nurse was anxious to move on. "This's no country picnic. If'n Mister Vinnie finds us snoopin' in his building, they'll be pickin' us off the tracks in little pieces."

"Don't you think it's time we called the police?" Greg finally asked.

Cap'n threw his big head back, his barrel chest exploding in raucous laughter. The others in the circle joined in, the banter bouncing from building to building down the dim alley. When it subsided, Cap'n said, "You was robbed on the street. Why didn't you ask someone to call 'em then?" Before Greg could respond, Cap'n continued. "Look

at us. We live on the street, feedin' on handouts from Reverend Keller's soup kitchen. We all been in and outta the slammer dozens a' times fer things we never done, and everyone of us is crazier 'n a wild horse on loco weed. 'Less we got solid proof, we got nothin'." The group, as one, gave a nod.

"That outta the way?" Nurse asked. Everyone nodded again, this time including Greg. "Let's review our assets. Smitty's got to go in to open the metal door. Got your picks?" Smitty blinked hard, his version of yes, and patted a large leather fanny pack buckled at his waist. "Sound's got to undo the alarm."

Sound, who seemed the most normal of the bunch, smiled at the challenge. "It would be easier, though," he countered, "to cut the phone lines and trip the breaker." He was a tall, flaxen-faced man. Dark rings under his sunken eyes and a gaunt frame matched his high-pitched, techno-nerd voice. "But I can do it inside, if you really want me to."

"We don't want 'em to know we was here," replied Nurse. Sound sighed in agreement. "Okay, then. Cap'n has ta' go in 'cause he's got the flashlight. Belle, me, Sunny and Ritter'll be a watchin' from outside. If'n someone comes to the front, Ritter'll bang on the gas pipe twice, then wait, then twice more. If'n someone comes to the back, he'll bang once, then wait, then once more. Got that?"

"I'd like to volunteer to go in," Greg blurted out. Everyone gave the newcomer a stare.

"Why?" asked Ritter and Nurse in unison.

"Didn't you say something about credit cards?"

"Yeah," Cap'n said. "Mister Vinnie pays for applications the *other* homeless no-goods find in the trash. If they're good for credit, he pays 'em seventy-five."

Greg shook his head, still stung by what had happened to him. "That's why I'm here."

Cap'n flinched. "What? You a cop?"

"No. I mean my life was ruined. Someone used my name and credit. They got me for almost two hundred thousand."

Sound gasped and put his hand to his mouth.

"Okay, so what are your assets?" Nurse interrupted.

"Like I said, I don't have any. I'm broke, bankrupt, lost my wife, home . . ."

Nurse wagged her head side to side. "That's not what we mean.

Cap'n's got a light; Smitty can pick a lock; Sound hates noise from alarms—takes 'em apart instead. What can you do?"

"I'm a computer programmer."

"You go too." Nurse waved her crippled hand. "Cap'n gives the orders."

Stephanie stood and slid her chair in. "That stew was the best yet, Grandpa. Now you two go talk your car talk and I'll do the dishes." She lifted her palms to show that she meant business. "I think you've both heard enough about baby names and childbirth for one night."

Grandpa slowly stood. "Thank you, dear. Think I'll take you up on that offer, go out on the porch—that is, if I can get the rigor mortis out of my old bones." He put a hand to his hip to help straighten up. "Now I believe I know what it's going to feel like to be dead."

"Grandpa!" Stephanie chided. "Don't even say things like that. A tough old codger like you will be around a long time. Besides, you've got two great-grandchildren that are going to need you."

"You might be right, but I'm no spring chicken. We better start thinkin' about what we should do with this place, you know."

"We will, Pa. There's plenty of time." Mitch swung open the front door and stepped out on the porch.

"That outfit from Yucca Mountain was back again," Grandpa said as he pulled his pipe pouch from his pocket. "Been stirrin' up trouble with the locals. The Indians won't even buy parts here anymore." He stuffed the end of the ancient hickory implement with tobacco and pressed it to his lips. He gave the pipe's barrel a nostalgic tap. "If your Grandma was still alive, she'd skin me alive with a butter knife for starting up this dirty ol' habit again."

Grandpa's property was bordered by the interstate to the east and Indian tribal land to the west. He'd successfully won a lawsuit against the government 30 years before, after they'd illegally put an off-ramp through his land. The tribe didn't want the white man's exit, so Grandpa sued the government, and won. He'd had many friends in the tribe—mostly gone, now—who'd supported his business to help him with the attorneys' fees.

"What about the guys from Yucca Mountain?" Mitch asked.

"Rumor has it they paid the tribe a quarter million to force me to sell. The money's theirs as soon as I'm outta business. Another twenty-

five million goes to the tribe when the road's finished. Only thing keepin' one of the locals from killin' me and takin' the land is the war they're having within the tribe about a highway cuttin' their land in two. Meantime, a few of the local bullies deal with anyone that buys parts from me. I think they're on the payroll of the outfit workin' on the mountain."

"I didn't think they'd even decided where to put the road yet."

"You kiddin', boy? Anyone droppin' that kind of cash knows what they're doin'."

"How long's this been going on?"

"'Bout a year. I'd sell and move to the city, if I wasn't so dog-gone stubborn. It's the principle a' the thing, you know. Ain't right someone showin' up and takin' somethin' that don't belong to 'em."

"How much longer do you think you can hold out?"

"Year—maybe two, if I keep doin' repairs and sellin' cars. The savings all went to fix the place up."

"Dang, Grandpa, you shouldn't have done it then."

"I haven't felt so good about spendin' my money for a long time. I want to be sure you bring those little ones to see me without 'em gettin' all grimy." The old man pulled a match from his shirt pocket and struck it on his pant leg. "I'll quit smokin' again, too, before the babies come."

"That's why you quit?" Mitch watched him draw the flame to his pipe and remembered the old geezer used to smoke it before his son died. "Because I moved in?"

"Your grandma insisted. Had a mind of her own, that woman. Wasn't enough I took it to the porch. She insisted I set a good example for you. . . . By the way, 'd you sell the goat?" He abruptly changed the subject, perhaps, Mitch thought, to keep the memories at bay. Mitch's eyes dropped to the wooden porch. "What is it, boy? I'd know that look even from the grave."

"It's been . . . stolen."

"Balls of fire! What happened?"

Mitch reluctantly launched into the story . . . all about Vinnie and his fancy Ferrari, the mobster's job offer, and his stolen car.

Back at the gym, Cap'n led the motley crew down the darkened corridor toward the second metal door. Smitty, having successfully jimmied the back door, drew the pick set from his pants pocket. "Gotta hold on, Smitty. Let Sound disarm the alarm first."

Sound took a screwdriver from the tool belt at his waist and pressed it behind the small keypad on the wall. "This'll be too easy. Standard-issue, residential . . . low-tech, Radionics, single-entry keypad . . . no mercury-level protection." Within 30 seconds he'd popped it off the wall. "Hmm." He crossed one arm at his chest, lifted the other to support his chin in thought. His weight shifted to one long leg, pivoting his hips to the side. "If I could just remember . . . which wire to pull first. My mind isn't what it was before I got sick."

"Take it easy. You can do it," whispered Cap'n. "We don't wanna scrub the mission on a technicality."

Smitty had placed the tension bar in the door lock and slid the pick inside to the pins. Seeing the arched shadow cast across the room to the opposite wall, Greg realized the source of Smitty's hunched-over posture. He felt his own heart rate quicken and his breath become labored by the stress of the break-in. *What a rush!*

"I think I got it," Sound murmured. He reached down and tugged a thin green wire and a miniature screwdriver from the pouch. With a flick of the wrist he attached one end of the wire to a stubby screw on the back of the keypad. "Cross your fingers." Then he lifted both hands in the air, fingers crossed, and mumbled a cursory prayer, his eyes squeezed shut.

Sound dropped the screwdriver back onto the pad and promptly retracted his hand, pressing his thumbnail to his front teeth and nibbling pensively. In an instant, the driver was back in his pouch and the small wire mounted in position. The keypad beeped and a luminous green digital glow reflected down the front of Sound's drab shirt and pants. He sighed a soft breath and lifted the pad to review the readout. "Oh my gosh!" he exclaimed, wide-eyed. "We've got just twenty-eight seconds—I mean twenty-six!" He dropped the keypad, left it dangling by the wires poking through the wall, and raced down the hall to the back door, his arms and legs waving wildly in the air.

Cap'n shone his beam on the fleeing man, then back on the keypad. Lifting the pad, everyone saw the readout—"19, 18, 17 . . ." The back door clicked shut. "Time to pull out the troops," he ordered. Cap'n lumbered down the hall, his army boots thumping the floor with every step. Smitty was three steps behind; Greg stumbled to catch up.

"Fire in the hole!" Cap'n hollered as he jumped from the landing, careening head-on into Ritter, who was standing in his path. The two

men tumbled, rolled, and lay sprawled on the crumbled asphalt, with Ritter gasping for air.

Greg shook his head at the sight—equal parts Three Stooges and Keystone Cops. The ragtag band was running from a simple building alarm as if a bomb were about to detonate. How far down the pit had he fallen? Six months before he'd have been sitting in his posh corner office on the eighth floor of the biggest computer chip manufacturer in the state of Nevada. Now he was breaking into a stinking gym—shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of misfit vagrants—to rescue its missing owner—and he was actually getting a rush from it. “*The Alley Team*,” that’s what he’d called them; “or maybe the A-team” for short. A rare bunch of sick alley cats.

SEVENTEEN

GRANDPA TAPPED HIS PIPE on the railing, dislodging a sooty plug from its barrel. He pulled the pouch from his pocket and tucked the old blackened hickory piece inside. "Looks like you got a choice to make, boy. Either find your car and get it back, or call the cops."

"I don't think it's quite that simple. I might be in trouble with the law again."

Grandpa's voice raised nearly a whole octave. "Hell's bells boy. Didn't ya' learn your lesson the last time?"

"This was different. I saved some guy's life. It looked like he was going to blow his brains out. Before it was over, the engineer from the train thought I was robbing the guy at gunpoint."

"So you ran, I take it?" Mitch nodded. "Can't blame ya, I guess. That must've brought back a flood a' ugly memories."

Mitch nodded again.

"Been doin' a bit of thinkin' about that myself. Don't think I been fair to you. I ain't spoke his name since the funeral. Hurt too much—my only son takin' his own life." Grandpa blinked back the tears. "... Maybe it's time for you and me to go see one of them shrinks. I've got to get past it so I can tell you 'bout your father before I'm gone. Besides, we been runnin' away from it too long."

"Yeah. . . . That'd be nice," Mitch said, followed by a long silence.

Finally intruding on the warm night air, Grandpa shrugged. "I've got a friend, a highway patrolman that owes me a few favors. I'll see what he can find. Maybe you can still make it right. Meanwhile, perhaps you ought'a bring that fancy car that belongs to this wise guy you been tellin' me 'bout up here and hide it in the garage. Do a little swap with him—kind'a balance the scales a bit."

"I don't know, Pa. This guy's a bad dude."

"Nothin' a retired Navy Seal and his pack o' dogs can't handle."

"Dogs!" Stephanie said, stepping out onto the porch and glancing around.

"No, the dogs are still locked up, Stef," Mitch assured her. "... Well, I'll get back to you, Grandpa; it's getting late and we have an hour's drive. I'll call you tomorrow."

Stephanie slipped on her shoes and gave the old man a hug. "I love you," she crooned. "Thanks for the stew."

"My pleasure, you beautiful girl. You bring this man of yours back every week and I'll have a pot waitin'. And take care of my great-grandchildren."

"We will."

He lingered on the porch, watched as the taillights disappeared down the road and up the freeway on-ramp. "I love you too, girl," he whispered.

The Alley Team huddled near the truck. Forth down and seventy-five yards to go. It didn't look good.

"Why in the blasted darkness didn't you tell me you was comin' to cut the wires?" Cap'n groused, peering across the huddle at Sound.

"No time. I made it by the skin of my teeth as it was." Sound's voice rose to an emphatic whine. "Sometimes there isn't time to wait for orders."

Nurse grimaced. "Now settle down. A few bumps and bruises, is all."

"Bruises, my bunions! The bloody ox 'bout knocked me block off." In all the excitement, Ritter's cockney accent sounded even more pronounced than usual.

"Learn to keep your bloomin' butt outta the road . . ."

"Okay, okay, boys," scolded the old woman. "That's about enough squabblin'. Ain't got time fer fightin'—gotta find Eddie, 'member?" The thought of Eddie's feared plight brought everyone back on the same page. "Smitty's gotta open the door; Sound's gotta switch the wire and help get the power back on; Cap'n and Sunny'll search the basement. Now hurry—don't know when Mister Vinnie's comin' for his stuff."

The group returned to the back of the building and climbed the steps. Smitty leaned over the lock. Greg looked on in awe. "You've got to show me how you do that."

Smitty grinned enthusiastically as the door knob turned and he

stepped aside to let the crew in. The four men entered the hall and Smitty again dropped his pick set into the lock to the basement door. Sound fiddled with the wire. A minute later, he snapped the keypad back into place and gave a double thumbs-up. He was finished. The lock clicked and the knob turned. Smitty broke into a wide smile, bowed, and waved his hand in a flourish toward the stairs. Sound started to the back to restore the power and phone lines.

Cap'n led the descent, his light panning the shadowy staircase. Each stair issued its own distinctive squeak under his heavy load. Greg noticed his own heart racing again and his palms growing moister at each passing moment.

All at once a light came on. Both men froze in their tracks.

"Eddie," the Cap'n whispered. "That you?" No one answered.

Greg's heart was in his throat, the blood ringing in his ears . . . then remembered and whispered, "It's just Sound turning on the power."

Cap'n exhaled. "My stars and tattered stripes, I knew that," he whispered in return.

The men stopped when they reached the concrete floor. Cautiously they inspected the dimly-lit room. A single bulb hung from the ceiling, a night light of sorts. It cast eery shadows across the jumble of paraphernalia before them: computers, piles of credit-card applications, phone books. File cabinets lined the walls.

Cap'n took to mumbling. "Sabotagin' infiltrators . . . Lebanon underground spies sneakin' 'round . . . covert operations . . . makin' bombs and blowin' up Federal buildings, shootin' planes out of the sky. . . . Can't tolerate this kind'a illegal activity, soldier. This outfit's the enemy. We gotta burn this rat hole, take it out a' operation."

"Cap'n, I'm waiting for your orders," Greg pleaded, deferring to his leader. "I need to see if I can open a computer while you look for Eddie."

Cap'n seemed to return from his daydream. "You know your orders, Private. Now get to work. I'll find Eddie."

Greg sat down and switched on the nearest computer. When the set-up command opened, his fingers tapped with digital speed. "Come on, you piece of trash." He rapped the table with his knuckles while he waited for the outdated machine to work through his commands. Nervous, he reached over and flipped on the second computer, rattling his keys absentmindedly.

Cap'n, led by his flashlight beam, bolted back in the room. "He's not down here. Let's move upstairs and check out the offices."

"Hold on. I'm just about in." The black screen flashed "ready." *Greg Hart*, he typed, then hit enter.

Cap'n looked over the computer whiz's shoulder. "Who's Greg Hart?"

"Me."

"Hey, we ain't here to fix your problems. We gotta find Eddie." The screen flashed blue. "Not found," it read.

"Hold on." Greg shut off the computer he was working on and slipped behind the other. "Give me a few more minutes."

The pipes in the building sounded a sharp, two-ring clank. "That's our signal to get outta here. Someone's comin'."

"One more minute." Fingertips a-blur, he typed in the back-door DOS commands. The pipes banged again.

"We's movin' *now*, Private." Cap'n clicked off the switch and picked Greg up off the chair like a rag doll.

"Okay, put me down! I get the point."

Disregarding the man's pleas, Cap'n hauled his "Private" to the first step and started him upward. Both men hurried to the landing and peeked out the door, around the corner toward the back door. It opened with a thud. Three men, talking quietly, stood talking on the back porch.

"Go, soldier!" Cap'n shoved Greg out the door into the hall. Greg, a naked mole caught in the light of day, crouched, frozen, staring down the hallway at the men. "Go!" Cap'n whispered again, pointing at the stairway. Greg tiptoed backwards to the second set of stairs, while Cap'n eased the door shut and went the other direction into the gym.

One of the men entered the unlit hall and flipped on the light. A second man barged past the first, cussed, and switched it off. "We didn't come in the middle of the night to tell the whole world we're here," he snarled. It was Vinnie.

"Pops wanders around all the time" Clint answered. "Nobody even pays attention anymore."

"Well, we ain't Pops."

Greg, pausing at the bottom of the stairway, felt the tension rise as Clint walked in his direction. The adrenaline surge of breaking and entering he'd experienced earlier had converted to full-fledged fear-terror, to be exact.

“The Friday drop’s in my office.” Clint stopped at the keypad on the wall. Greg backed up and placed his foot on the bottom stair. The keypad beeped, the stair squeaked. Clint turned his head to listen. Then the keypad started to squeal. Thinking all heck had broken loose, Greg turned and bounded up the steps.

“What’s the matter with it?” Vinnie asked over the din as Clint punched in the code again.

“How should I know? Do I look like an alarm specialist?” He raised his fist and gave the keypad a thump. It fell from the wall, wires everywhere. The small green wire screwed onto the back instantly glowed a bright crimson, smoldered a second, and burned in half, choking off the shrieking alarm.

“I know enough to know someone’s been screwin’ with it,” Vinnie said, pulling a new pistol from its holster. “Probably the old man.”

Mitch and Stephanie turned the corner of their cul-de-sac. The gang bangers were still hanging out on the street, drinking their beers, smoking their Havana weed; the girls danced to the beat of ear-piercing music, prancing in front of their guys. Mitch waved and honked. The smell of pot drifted through the open car window.

Stephanie narrowed her lips, clearly annoyed. “How can you do that?”

“What, be their friend?” They’d had the same discussion before.

“They give me the willies.”

“They’re not that bad, just confused. They probably don’t have much of a family life. . . .” Mitch spied the glowing red ember of Al’s cigarette on the porch next door. An inky silhouette fell against the open door, thrown by the streetlight. The soft glow flooded the inert face of their shirtless neighbor. “Now there’s a man I don’t trust,” scoffed Mitch. “He’s got too much time on his hands. Make sure you use the garage door opener and keep the house locked while I’m gone.”

Stephanie shuddered involuntarily. “He gives me the creeps.”

Mitch closed the garage door and circled the car to help Stephanie out. “You know, this’ll be the first time we’ll be apart,” she said. Her bottom lip drooped in her best ‘sad little girl’ impression.. “So . . .”—she gave Mitch an inviting pinch on the cheek—“we’d better make a few memories to keep your mind where it belongs.”

The three dark figures moved down the creaky set of stairs to the basement. Clint had successfully assured Vinnie there was no need for the gun. "Look, nothing's out of place. If Pops wanted us in jail he could'a had the cops here months ago."

Vinnie's eyes swept back and forth. "I'll feel better when we're outta this place and set up in the warehouse. The old man don't know where it is, does he?"

"No way."

Soon the driver and passenger from the truck had joined Vinnie, Clint and Frank, the other grunt. Now five strong, they began loading equipment in boxes and wheeling files on dollies up the stairs to the truck. Greg stood in the upper hallway, listening to the muted voices and squeaky wheels toting away every scrap of evidence showing that he'd been bilked—the only life-saving evidence that could possibly resurrect his financial future.

Clint excused himself and started up the stairs to retrieve Friday's drop. Hearing the falling footsteps, Greg crept into the storage room, pressed the door all but closed and peeked through the crack.

Clint, meanwhile, turned on his office light, scanned the room, then remembered Angelo's anxious departure the night before. He'd dropped the box on the storage room floor. Flicking the light off, he proceeded down the hall. Greg, in scrambling to find a place to hide, nudged a box from a pile, sending it crashing to the floor. Clint stopped and listened. Pausing only a moment, he pushed open the door and turned on the light. Greg cowered on the floor only five feet away, behind a shelf packed with old punching bags and gloves. He stared through the open shelves at Clint's leather sandals. Clint took two steps forward through the debris, then stopped short.

Greg, barely out of sight, was sure the man could hear his heaving lungs and the pounding of his heart.

Clint, indeed, was well aware of the other's presence. He bent over and called out quietly to the huddled figure. "I heard you on the steps. You might as well come out."

Greg peered at Clint's massive arms through the shelf slats. *A heart attack might help now*, he thought. There was no way he'd be able to take on this guy. Greg lifted himself to his knees, trying to form the words of surrender. Perhaps as a vagrant, he'd merely be thrown back out onto the street.

“You ain’t a coward—and Vinnie doesn’t know you’re here,” Clint continued. “We’re moving the operation out of the basement, Pops. Tomorrow it’ll be like it used to be.” With that, Clint turned and left the room, latching the door behind him.

Greg breathed a sigh of relief. *He thinks I’m Eddie.* Then, feeling the blood drain from his face, he collapsed back onto the floor, gasping for air.

Mitch lay on his pillow, his thoughts, far-off, staring up at the ceiling. Stephanie’s labored breathing could be heard at his side. Ever since the little lives had begun to grow inside her, she’d acquired when she slept, a soft resonant snore. Her hand twitched on his chest as she dozed peacefully.

He couldn’t ask Grandpa for money; the old man didn’t have much to give. Nor could he go to the police just yet; it would kill Stephanie if he were busted again. And his promise to pay the rent had come and gone. The shutoff notices were piling up.

He eased out from under Stephanie’s arm, slipped from bed and retreated to the kitchen. Maybe he could get approved for a new card and transfer a balance before he left the following evening. Plopping down onto a chair by the phone, he tore open the application with his thumb. *Pre-approved, \$5,000 credit, 2.9% on transferred balances for six months, call 24 hours a day, seven days a week.* He dialed the number.

When the operator came on the line, he read off the printed confirmation number. After a smattering of questions, he was transferred to an “account representative.” Minutes later, she came back on the line. “Mr. Wilson,” she politely said, “I’m going to have to send this application through the credit department before we can approve it. We’ll be contacting you by mail.”

Mitch grimaced. “I thought I was *pre-approved*.”

“Well, sir, it appears that several things have changed on your credit report. Maybe you should contact the reporting agencies and make sure everything is in order?”

Mitch thought about the phone, power and gas bills—barely over 30 days, not possibly reported as late yet. “What kind of things are showing up?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m not allowed to discuss it over the phone. I’ll be

happy to give you the numbers for the reporting agencies . . .”

“Please.” Mitch jotted down the toll-free numbers to the three major agencies and immediately called. All three were closed until Monday. He went back to bed, feeling like a noose was slowly being cinched down around his neck. There was no option left but one: Vinnie. It was time to take him on.

Staying clear of the windows, Greg passed the time by quietly exploring every nook and cranny of the storage room. Pry marks on the paint beneath what appeared to be a laundry chute door—together with the bar laying nearby—piqued his curiosity. He lifted the door with his fingers. A wave of foul air rushed out as he peered into its musty depths. The unmistakable marks of hand prints in the dust lined the walls.

Gulping a breath of fresh air, he forced his head into the opening to see where it went. “Hello?” he whispered. He could almost taste the acrid smell of vomit, summoning once more the memory of his own destructive behavior of a few days earlier. No one answered. “Eddie . . . you there?” Having left his own desperate feelings of depression far behind, Greg was now genuinely concerned with the old man’s welfare.

He turned to the window, cautiously eyeing the street below. The wait seemed like hours before the delivery truck finally pulled from the back door, one fancy car in the lead, one taking up the rear. Greg heard the engine crank over on Eddie’s pickup. Again peeking out, he saw the battered old truck give a heave and a puff, then quit, not having moved an inch.

Greg crept out of the storage room. Cap’n’s muted voice echoed up the stairs. “Sunny, you find anything?”

“Bring your flashlight,” Greg answered. “And hurry.” The big man bolted up the stairs and the two of them—Cap’n’s flashlight in hand—squinted down the chute. There, crumpled in a broken heap at the bottom of the shaft, lay Eddie.

“Eddie!” Cap’n yelled, his voice thundering down the shaft. The old man didn’t stir. “Eddie . . . Eddie!” Turning on his heels, he charged from the room, yelling instructions over his shoulder. “Get Nurse and call an ambulance!”

Halfway down the stairs the sound of splintering wood could be heard bouncing off the walls of the old gym. By the time Greg had

caught up to Cap'n, the bulldozer of a man had torn the locked metal door from off its jamb and was nearly at the base of the stairs.

Greg flew down the hall and out the back door. Smitty and Sound terminated their argument about whether to follow the moving truck and listened to Greg's plea for help. "Eddie fell down the chute!" His tone was that of a powerful executive at an important boardroom meeting.

Nurse, hearing the news, gasped in horror. "In the well?"

"No, I think it's a laundry chute. He's at the bottom; can't tell if he's dead or alive."

Greg and the rag-tag group tore back down the stairs. The sound of splintering wood and crumbling sheet rock was as ominous as the cloud billowing up from the basement. They reached the bottom stair and felt their way through the dust and debris. Cap'n's steady grunts brought them to where he worked. Bloody fist marks and gaping holes adorned the far wall. Cap'n, wielding his bare hands, was shredding through decades of remodeling and termite-infested lumber that formed Eddie's tomb. Layer upon layer, the powerful man tore recklessly at the rotting wood and decayed plaster until at last he broke through.

The foul stench of vomit, urine and blood permeated the air, riding the dust. Cap'n knelt near a dried puddle of blood running from the rough boards of the outcropping chute.

Amid the confusion, Nurse frantically paced the floor, stumbling in the dim basement light, her eyes distant and unfocused. She coughed and sputtered, circling the room, babbling incoherently. Every so often she'd hunker down and cry out, "No, no . . . not again . . . not again," her fists clenched at her side. "Should'a buried that well last year when it dried up," she repeated, over and over. "Told ya we should'a! . . ." Occasionally she would look over at Cap'n, who was still pulling sections of horizontal lath from the wall.

Finally Cap'n stopped digging. Greg knelt nearby, holding the flashlight. Its beam pierced the thick air to reveal a ghastly sight. Eddie's dust-covered face, arms and hands were swollen beyond recognition. From his waist down he was covered in a crusty coat of blood. His mangled legs were bent at a grotesque angle.

Nurse looked on in horror. An unnatural scream surged from her throat. Then, before collapsing to the floor, she wailed, "Is she dead? Can you save her? . . . Oh, please, dear God, don't let my baby die!"

Greg pressed a finger to the side of the old man's neck. Cocking his

ear as if listening for a heartbeat, he shook his head slowly. Then he hesitated. "Wait! I've got a pulse."

Cap'n yanked a few remaining fragments from the wall. "That's it, you tough old codger. A rat hole ain't no place for a boxin' champ to die. You fight, you old cuss. Fight!" Sirens advertised the arrival of the ambulance. Nurse rocked slowly back and forth, still slumped on the concrete floor, her tear-stained face buried in her arms.

EIGHTEEN

NINE O'CLOCK. THE SUN had inched higher above the rolling desert horizon, casting promising beams through the hospital windows that lined the east wall of the waiting room. The Alley Team, grim-faced, sat huddled at the opposite wall. They hardly spoke. Like frightened children waiting for the doctor to give them a shot, they sat, still and somber.

A woman with permed, graying hair sat across the way, her back to the windows. Impeccably dressed, her long, manicured nails were in keeping with the sparkling diamond ring on her finger.

Nurse had not yet snapped out of her stupor. A remote fear penetrated her entire being. In her mind, an hour glass tumbled in space and time, spilling sand as it went. It careened to and fro in the slow-motion frames of an old-fashioned movie, flashing pictures from 40 years past. Greg had his arms circled about Nurse's stooped shoulders, her matted, gray head resting on his chest. They rocked gently, her eyes still those of a child awakened from the clutches of a night terror. The team of vagrants glanced up occasionally, impotent, totally helpless, totally hopeless.

Comforting the old woman who had given him so much comfort, Greg spoke softly. "The doctors have hope. . . . Eddie's a tough old man. . . ."

"I ain't never seen her like this," Ritter whispered to the others. He was as concerned about Nurse as he was about Eddie. "And I've know her for more'n ten years."

Cap'n gave the old woman's hand a sympathetic pat. "Eddie's like a brother to her. She's been livin' in his alley off and on now 'bout forty 'er fifty years." The stranger in the waiting room strained to overhear the conversation.

"Does anyone know what she kept mumbling about?" Greg asked. "When we found Eddie, that's when she went off—something about a

well and a baby.” Each member of the little close-knit pack in turn lowered his eyes and shook his head.

It was then the woman across the aisle spoke up. “I might be able to help.” She got to her feet and walked toward them, her high heels clicking. “The best I can remember, her name is Rebecca Lambert. I knew her when I was six years old.”

“Who are you?” Greg interrupted.

“Margaret Thurston, Eddie’s daughter.” Everyone’s jaw dropped in stunned silence. “Eddie called me three days ago in New York, he said he needed to see me. He told me it was important. I hadn’t been out to visit for several years and decided it was a good time to come see my dad—and my *son Clinton*.” Her tone was decidedly sarcastic when she spoke Clint’s name. “When I arrived at the gym this morning, I was told Eddie was here. Do any of you know what happened?”

After several anxious moments, Greg spoke up. “We think he fell or was shoved down the old laundry chute. We’re still waiting for the doctors to tell us how he’s doing.” Cap’n threw a furious glance in Greg’s direction.

Margaret took no notice. “They told me they expect him to be out of surgery within the hour.” She grimaced. “Who would want to hurt him?”

The Alley Team looked back and forth at each other, every lip securely locked. Cap’n stood and offered Eddie’s daughter his seat.

“An hour, that’s good—they haven’t told us much at all.” Greg attempted to steer the conversation in a more positive direction. He gave Nurse a pat on the arm. “You say her name is Rebecca.”

“I was six years old when my father moved here and opened the gym,” began Margaret. “When the health department came to inspect the place, they started inquiring about me and where my mother was. When they discovered Eddie was raising a daughter—by himself, in a male environment—they threatened to take me away. Dad started looking into boarding schools. Eventually he found one. The day I left I cried on my best and only friend’s shoulder.” Margaret reached over and took Nurse’s hand. “Rebecca. . . Rebecca, it’s Marge,” she cooed. “I’m Eddie’s little girl. Remember me?”

“Marge? . . . That you? You back from school so soon? . . . Your Daddy’s sure goin’ ta’ be glad to see you ‘gain. . . I hear him cryin’ in his room at night for you. He’s missed you somethin’ terrible.” Nurse

smacked her gums and blinked glassily into the woman's hazel-green eyes. "Look at you. . . . You're growin' up so pretty. Eddie hasn't stopped talkin' 'bout you since ya' left."

Margaret struggled to maintain her composure. "Rebecca, how's Belle?" she asked. As a small girl she'd pretended to play with Nurse's "daughter."

The old woman's eyes narrowed in on Margaret's face. "She's dead," she whimpered. "My little girl's dead. . . . Fell in the well . . . and I couldn't find her."

Margaret knelt in front of Nurse, her own eyes brimming with tears. "I know, sweetie, I know." The women embraced, a melding of rags and riches—bridged by the tie of friendship. Nurse, in wave after wave of anguished sobs, mourned the loss of her daughter. For the first time in 50 years, she mourned. The team of vagrants hung their heads in respect at the loss of a friend. Belle, a girl they knew yet had never met, was finally being put to rest.

Stephanie woke to the sound of a toothbrush striking the edge of the sink. It was one of Mitch's annoying bathroom habits. Leaving the seat up and the door open were the two worst. She'd tried to overlook them. But now, after three years, they were getting to her. Somehow she'd never found a good way to tell him how she felt. Besides, he'd grown up in a junkyard; what else could she expect? He possessed so many wonderful traits—those, by far, balanced out the bad.

Mitch traipsed into the bedroom wrapped in a towel, face clean shaven, wet hair disheveled. She reminded herself how good-looking he was. "Good morning, beautiful queen." He smiled, trying not to think of the stolen car or the fiscal burden he bore on his broad shoulders.

Stephanie dug her elbow into the mattress, rolled her tummy to the side, and rested her head in her hand. She frowned down at the towel, now crumpled on the floor. She would be the one to pick it up and put it in the laundry only a few steps away. Mitch never did. "Are you coming to church this morning?" she asked, her tone hopeful.

"Nah. Too much to do before I leave. Maybe next week."

"That's what you said last week, and every week since we've been married," she protested. Sunday mornings were another source of irritation between them. Mitch had promised her they would raise their children in a religious home. She was Presbyterian; he, Lutheran. She

didn't even mind which church they went to, so long as they could go as a family.

"No, it isn't," Mitch countered a little defensively. "I've gone several times with you."

"Six times in three years—Christmas and Easter . . ."

"And you're counting?" The words stung. His back to her, he continued to rummage through the packed closet for his luggage.

"No, it's just that our babies will be here soon, and I was hoping . . ."

Her husband wasn't listening. "Have you been messing with my files?" He opened the lid to the small metal box to tuck in a receipt that was sticking part way out.

"Your files?"

"For crying out loud, Stef!" Mitch jerked the box from the corner with both hands and held up the wadded papers.

Stephanie rolled from bed and stepped over to the small walk-in closet. "Don't blame me. You're the one that handles *the money* in this house."

"And you're the one that insists on keeping my receipts put away. I certainly didn't scatter this stuff all over. So who else would?"

The harsh accusations were enough to drive Stephanie from the room. With a slam of the bathroom door, Mitch was left alone to sort through the clutter of paperwork.

The doctor appeared in the carpeted waiting room area. Inquiring at the front desk, a nurse gestured toward Mrs. Thurston. Approaching, he said, "Mrs. Thurston, are you Eddie Alders' daughter?"

Margaret looked up. "Yes."

"Are these people with you?" he added, taking in the odd-looking assortment of vagrants.

Margaret nodded. "This is Eddie's family."

Once more the doctor glanced about the room, then turned back to address Margaret. "I'm Doctor Broderick. I just finished operating on your father's kidneys. It was touch-and-go for a time, trying to figure out why his heart rate was so low. The blood work-up tells us he was bitten by a black widow spider. The slower heart rate probably saved his life and kept him from bleeding to death—along with his simple will to live. I pulled a handful of wood splinters from his spleen; some had penetrated his liver. The orthopedic surgeon has almost finished pinning

his broken legs. I think he'll be just fine—he's tough—but it'll be several weeks, maybe months before he's back on his feet. He's going to need a lot of help."

Margaret stood and smoothed at her dress. "How soon can we see him?"

"It'll probably be a few hours before he's out of recovery. Why don't I call down to the cafeteria and let the hospital buy you all a hot meal." The doctor, considering the matter settled, folded his glasses and slid them in his shirt pocket.

Margaret almost started to protest, but was cut short by Cap'n, who asked, "They still cook that halibut?"

Dr. Broderick smiled. "They sure do." He escorted his guests to the elevator and instructed an aid to see that they were well cared for. Margaret remained behind for a few minutes to explain to the doctor the trauma Nurse was experiencing.

The papers were finally resorted and filed. Mitch, unable to find the title to the GTO, knew he owed Stephanie an apology. His growing hatred toward Vinnie, however, was too strong. He'd have to postpone patching up the domestic spat until after he returned. He wasn't about to try and tell her where he figured the missing title went. The young Chicano posing as Jose Vasquez had invaded his home, he was sure. The home would have been an easy mark. The GTO's glove box held the registration showing his address and the garage door opener. Before the day was over he would change the code on the motor. In the meantime, simply unplugging the motor would keep anyone from getting in.

Mitch marched past the bathroom without saying a word to his bride. She'd stopped crying and now stood at the mirror, blow dryer sweeping up and down her hair. Deciding it was still unsafe to drive the Camaro, Mitch pulled the Escort from the garage, manually brought down the overhead door, and pattered off to find Bino. He planned to borrow the much-needed funds to make a rent payment and leave some cash for Stephanie to use while he was away.

He could only guess what a loan from Vinnie might entail. The look in Bino's eyes a few nights earlier had been ample warning.

The vocational competition now seemed very low on Mitch's list of priorities. In fact, if there was any hope of a refund on his plane ticket and

hotel reservation, which he'd purchased months in advance, he'd give it up altogether. But it might all turn out for the best. The school was counting on him. And four days away just might be the thing they both needed. At least it would buy him some time.

Dressed in her Sunday best, Stephanie made ready to leave. She wasn't sure why she'd lit into Mitch the way she did. Why had she nagged him about church? Forcing him to God wasn't the way. Her minister had counseled with her on several occasions about the rift it was creating. She knew he was right—that Mitch would need to decide for himself. Yet it was the same every week: she'd ask if he was coming, he'd make up some excuse, they'd both be cranky for several hours. But today, he'd been downright mean.

She opened the door to the garage. "My car!" she muttered at seeing the empty space. "He *knew* I was going to church, and still took my car." She clomped down the steps to where the car had been parked and tugged through her dress at the band squeezing her waist. The offending pantyhose kept slipping down to her hips. Reluctantly, she went over to the Camaro, slid into the low bucket seat, and reached overhead to click open the garage door. The empty visor again brought her to her feet, only to find the pantyhose halfway down around her knees. She swore under her breath, tugged the hosiery down, and sat back into the seat to pull them from her feet. No way was she going to spend the day wearing sweaty panty hose and fighting to keep them glued to her expanding waistline.

When the push-button switch at the kitchen door failed to open the garage door, the frustration finally spilled over. She squeezed the wadded nylons into a ball and banged it against the dashboard. Mitch had kept her from her Sunday worship. Had it been on purpose? It was possible. She'd noticed some subtle changes in his demeanor the last few days. Until that very moment, she hadn't realized how distracted he'd been acting.

Mitch never expressed his feelings openly, but instead seemed to wear them on the inside of his tool-chest, protected, often by humor, sometimes by silence, but most of all by a hard, locked metal door. Today, maybe, by anger. She'd learned to read him pretty well, and usually found ways to pry his feelings out using gentle persuasion. Now she had no idea what to do.

The Husky parking lot was empty. Janice sat in her booth reading a book, her back to where Mitch had parked. The air conditioner rattled and hummed, leaving the woman completely unaware he was there, sliding the glass aside.

The woman jerked around, stifling a gasp and dropping the book in her lap. "Oh—my land of sunshine! . . . Mitch, you scared the bejeebies out of me!"

"Oh, sorry," he said. In fact, he'd meant to startle her. A mean streak had begun to unravel inside his chest. He felt justified in harboring thoughts of retaliation. He'd hoped somehow sneaking up on her would make him feel better. It hadn't. "I wasn't even sure anyone was here," he lied. "Where's your car?"

Janice was patting her chest and breathing rapidly. Her cheery cheeks seemed flushed from the scare. "I'm too old to take much of that. I think my heart may have missed a beat."

A twinge of guilt washed over Mitch. She wasn't the one to blame. "I'm sorry. I should have knocked first."

"It's okay." The kindly woman exhaled again. "It was such a beautiful day I decided to walk to work. I might regret it this afternoon, going home in this heat. . . . Any luck finding your car?"

"Nope. I think I'm wasting my time." The air inside the booth smelled like it had been forced through a tobacco-caked cooling system. Mitch averted his nose and breathed in shallow sniffs. "How can you stand the foul air in here?"

"My late husband—rest his miserable soul—was a heavy smoker. Bought him an early grave. I lived with it 39-plus years."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. He was an abusive pig—no conscience. My two children still blame me for not protecting them from his violent outbursts. I guess that's why I put up with Bino. He's a good man at heart, but just doesn't see what he's doing to himself. Or maybe he just can't stop. Half the time I think he wants to die and just get it over with."

"Speaking of Bino, I need to talk to him. Do you know where he lives?"

"Not far from here. I gave him a ride home once when his car broke down. I don't think I can remember how to get there, though."

"What's his first name—I'll look him up." Mitch glanced past Janice to the

desk, where Bino's daughter smiled sweetly from the photo on top. Janice, finally catching the hint, fished a thick phone book from one of its drawers.

"It starts with a B. . . ." She paused. "He's named after a great, great grandfather who founded a town in Texas—first law man in a long line of sheriff ancestors. Poor Bino. His family won't let him forget it, either." Her brow crumpled in thought as she opened the book and tried to remember. "D," she whispered. She flipped through the pages. "Daniels. . . . Let's see. Bernalillo Daniels. That's it. Bernalillo, New Mexico, was the town." Her finger slid across the page. "Lives at Coran and Rancho, Lilly's Trailer Park. I don't see a trailer number, but if I remember correctly you need to enter from the north. Stop at the office—they'll have a map."

A car pulled into the station and an older man stepped from the vehicle to the pump. Janice stood, flipped the reset to the pump, and slid open the window. "Good morning, Mr. Moore." Her voice rose several decibels so the old fellow could hear her. "You must be doing a lot of driving lately. This is the second time you've been in this month."

Mitch slipped from the other side of the booth and pulled out of the station, heading northwest on Rancho. Coran was only a few blocks farther down. Bino's place wouldn't be hard to find, not if his Audi was parked next to it.

Stephanie milled about the house, trying to decide if she should be mad at Mitch or be more attentive to his needs. His stress, after all, surely was related to their financial woes. Maybe a good home-cooked meal would put a smile on his face and they could sit down and talk before he left town.

The phone's ring brought Stephanie to the kitchen wall near the stack of bills. A quick check of the caller I.D. was a safe move. It was the landlord. She let it ring. There was nothing to tell him. Mitch would take care of it—just like he always did. Where was Mitch, anyway? It was close to noon.

A quick pass through the kitchen cupboards rounded up a half a bag of coiled vermicelli, two chicken bullion cubes, a can of refried beans and a can of spinach. Not much of a selection, but the sort of food Mitch seemed to enjoy. She'd top the meal off with the only vegetable in the fridge: a partial head of cabbage fried in lots of butter. Mitch had

learned to cook from his grandpa. His meals were quick and not so bad, if one liked everything fried. Granted, when it came to kitchen skills he was the better cook, and they both knew it—though Mitch always gushed about how much he loved her cooking.

They'd made it a habit of having lunch at home on Sundays, together. Mitch always had it ready when she came home from church. The hot meal always brought a smile to her face and helped acquit him of his broken promises about attending church. She was an easy mark, quick to forgive. A kind deed—or breaking bread together—could tame even the most savage mood.

NINETEEN

MITCH PARKED A FEW SPACES behind the Audi. He remained in the car, surveying the dilapidated, ethnically-mixed, forty-year-old trailer park. Two trailers down was parked a late-model, full-size Chevy two-door, its chrome glittering in the sun. Its two Hispanic occupants, both wearing backwards baseball caps and designer sunglasses, leaned on the horn, the wail only barely audible over the throbbing beat pounding at the windows of the surrounding trailers. The car sat low, its soft under-belly only inches from the crumbling asphalt. A young man, similar in appearance to the other head-bobbing Mexicans, bounded from the broken screen door of the trailer and propelled himself through the sleek automobile's open door.

The car's squat tires squealed and the front end vaulted from the ground, angling skyward. The back end of the car followed. When the car approached a faded yellow speed bump that stretched across the road, it slowed to a crawl. The gangly, pigeon-toed car eased prudently over the bump, dropped back near the ground, and once more bounced off to the beat of the music.

Mitch smiled to himself as he watched the engineering fiasco hop down the narrow drive.

Bino's turquoise trailer was a single-wide with roll-out slatted windows. Most of its ramshackle, sun-bleached metal skirting lay on the ground, exposing the cinder blocks that held up the frame. Litter dotted the cobweb-infested ground under the trailer.

Mitch got out and walked up to the tiny three-step porch. When he placed his foot on the weathered 2-by-4s, the entire structure rocked and swayed, moaning at the load. Taking care not to put all his weight in one spot, he inched his way up onto the shower stall-size landing.

The smell of cigarettes oozed from the cracks of the windows and door, forced outside into the hot, dry air by a window-mounted swamp cooler. The squeaky, vibrating contraption leaked precious drops of

life down the faded siding, forming a muddy puddle on the ground. At the edges of the puddle, a tall harvest of grass and weeds had sprung up.

Mitch knocked on the hollow door, which left his knuckles coated with a chalky, turquoise paint residue. He wiped them on his jeans.

Bino's distinctive hack preceded his raspy voice. "... Who is it?"

"Mitch Wilson."

The trailer shook at the approaching footsteps. Bino unbolted the door and thrust his head through the smoke-filled gap. "What you doing here?" His squinty eyes hadn't yet adjusted to the light.

"I need to talk to you."

"How'd you find me?"

Mitch smiled. "In the phone book . . . Bernalillo."

Bino brushed off the perceived slight. "What do you want?" He hugged the door and shot an angry glance in the direction of the street. Mitch followed Bino's gaze. There, walking a stocky bulldog on a leash, was an overweight man with a close marine haircut. The dark, tattooed arms and six-inch cigar trapped in his lips cast a lasting impression.

Mitch turned back to face his adversary. "Can I come in, or do you want me to talk out here where everyone can hear?"

"Can't it wait 'til later? . . . I'll be at the station . . . later this afternoon . . ." The man on the street stopped, staring over at them. He reached up and drew the cigar from his mouth, then spit on the ground.

Mitch tapped his foot impatiently; he needed to get some answers. "I'm leaving town, remember?"

Bino hesitated and drew a breath. Finally he relented, easing the door open.

Mitch entered the darkened room and allowed his eyes to adjust to the stale, barroom atmosphere. Sound equipment boxes, stacked ceiling-high, covered not only every inch of wall space but every window as well. Each stack was marked as a different item. "Quite an inventory," Mitch mumbled under his breath.

"It's not what . . . it looks like," Bino started to explain through sporadic wheezes. "I buy the close-out . . . and defective merchandise . . . from two major electronics . . . manufacturers. . . ."

"I know. Janice told me."

"The kids buy it . . . cause they think it's hot. The price is as good . . . as if it was stolen."

Mitch surveyed the room. A single overstuffed recliner sat alongside an overburdened ashtray. The recliner faced a big-screen TV, which flashed a life-size dose of porno into the dismal setting.

"Hey, but I've never . . . sold you anything that's . . . defective," Bino hastily added, reaching for the remote. "Sorry. My . . . Sunday afternoon entertainment." The screen went blank.

Mitch punctuated the point of his visit. "I need a loan."

Bino dragged his oxygen tank from the door to a small kitchen and stuck the mask up to his nose. Then he slid a cheap plastic seat from the kitchen over to the easy chair and sat down, out of breath. "I was afraid . . . you'd come asking. How much?"

"Five grand."

Bino pointed at the recliner. "Have a seat. . . . A loan? Can't do."

"What do you mean *can't*?"

"Don't have that much. . . . It's all in inventory."

Mitch lowered himself awkwardly onto the edge of the easy-chair. "You told me the other night . . ."

"You want hard cash . . ." Bino butted in. "I know. . . . But Vinnie's money's dirty. I've decided . . . *I* won't loan it to you."

"Hard cash?"

"A loan you can't ever . . . pay back. Five plus interest . . . makes ten, add the fees . . . and you'll owe twelve . . . plus a few favors. When . . . you make the payment . . . a day late . . . you owe a few more . . . favors."

"I can handle Vinnie."

"Sure! That's what I thought . . . two years ago. Now . . . I gotta jump off . . . a speeding train with . . . both arms and hands . . . tied behind my back. . . . Kind'a like suicide. I've decided . . . it's time to do it. . . . Got to give you . . . credit for giving me . . . the courage. You woke me up . . . the other night . . . when you jumped the fence. . . . I realized I was . . . stabbing my friends in . . . the back."

"We can take him on together."

"Look kid . . ." Bino's laugh ended up in a coughing fit. When he'd quieted it, he went on. "You've been living . . . a sheltered life where most people do what . . . they say they'll do. This's a different world. . . . You step onto Vinnie's turf . . . you'll never get off. He'll . . . own you, lock, stock . . . and air tools . . . 'til you're dead."

"He's already got my tool chest in the trunk of my goat."

“Write it off and . . . stay clear. He wants . . . the rest of your . . . inventory, too.”

“Inventory?”

“He’s squeezin’ you, kid. . . . Don’t you get it? You didn’t . . . take his offer . . . and he don’t take no for an answer . . . he needs a good . . . body, fender and paint man. . . . The last one quit . . . and went to work for Mike. . . . Haven’t you put . . . two and two . . . together yet? He knows . . . you’re short on cash . . . and he wants you in . . . his back pocket.”

Mitch’s eyes blinked. It was as if a light had come on inside his head. “Vinnie killed the guy?”

Bino brought a finger up and touched the tip of his nose. “But don’t really know. . . . Vinnie, Clint . . . Ty, Franky, his . . . friends from Jersey? . . . What does it matter . . . who did it? Everybody knows he’s . . . the one responsible. . . . He practically brags about it. ‘Course, nobody . . . can prove it. He’s ready . . . to hang it on some other . . . sucker, ripe for the picking. . . . A message . . . to everyone else . . . not to screw with him.”

Mitch shook his head. “You lost me.”

“Don’t matter. Said way . . . more than I should’ve . . . anyway. I’ve got . . . three hundred and change. . . . Pay me back . . . later, no fees—if I’m . . . still around when . . .” A second coughing spell bit off Bino’s words. He looked up, teary-eyed. “In a few months . . . I should have a . . . a couple’a grand. It’s . . . yours, too.” He pulled a wallet from his back pocket, emptied it of cash, and pressed the money forward.

“You’re talking crazy. If you’re in that much trouble, go to the FBI or something.”

“Been there, done that . . . and now I’m here. Look . . . I’ve lived a life . . . after my own making . . . rebelled against the . . . family traditions . . . trashed my body and . . . destroyed the lives of those . . . that depended on me. . . . Now it’s time to pay . . . the conductor or . . . get off the train. And . . . I’m getting off.”

Bino stood, drew a smoke from his pocket and pressed it to his lips, then stepped to open the door. “You can’t get on . . . this train kid. It’s full.” The unlit Camel fluttered up and down in Bino’s lips. “Besides, its . . . final destination is Hell . . . and you don’t belong there.” He drew a lighter from his pocket and lit the cigarette, then aimed it at the open door. Mitch stepped onto the rickety landing. “You even try . . . to get on and I’ll . . . have the cops on you . . . so fast you’ll think

you're . . . drowning. Remember, I . . . got a whole family full . . . of 'em. Have a good trip." Bino shut the trailer door in Mitch's face.

Mitch stood on the porch, stunned. He could hear Bino hacking from inside his self-imposed dungeon. A string of domestic screams emanated from a trailer three or four doors down. He slowly climbed from the landing and into Stephanie's car. *Now what was he going to do?* The little car started, sputtered, and quit. *What was that?* he wondered. *Maybe it did need a new fuel pump.* Mitch cranked over the ignition again. The little car purred. *Strange. . . .*

Next stop would be Mike's to pick up a few tools for his trip.

The weight of his financial predicament seemed to grow heavier by the hour.

Stephanie sampled the fried cabbage and added more salt. The green glow of the clock on the counter said one o'clock. And Mitch wasn't back. The cabbage was rapidly becoming too soft and the beans too dry. She lifted one bare foot and rested it in the back of the opposite knee as she turned off the burners to the stove. Her ankles were feeling a bit swollen.

I'm sorry, Mitch. Maybe I did mess up your files. It's been so long since I've been in them I can't remember . . . She rehearsed the lines in her mind. She wanted to be the first to apologize this time, beat Mitch to the punch. He always was so quick to say "I'm sorry"—even if he wasn't in the wrong. It wasn't that way for her growing up. Everyone in her home blamed everyone else. No one ever used the word "sorry." It was from Mitch that she'd learned the power of those simple words. Within seconds an "I'm sorry" could suck the fire right out of a fight.

Stephanie retreated to the living room, propped her feet up for some Bible reading, and tried not to be cranky about the meal getting cold. She could hear Al and Joan quarreling next door. Before a minute had passed, their screen door slammed shut and a coffee cup crashed out on the driveway.

I'm sorry I upset you with my comments about church. I'll wait 'til you're ready to come with me, Stephanie repeated again, wondering which apology would be best to start with. Then she opened her Bible.

Mitch pulled up to the locked gate of Mike's Body Shop and rattled the chain-link fence. Mike always came from the trailer to open up if

it was locked, but no one stirred. “Mike, you there?” he yelled. Still no response. Mike’s brown 4x4 was parked next to the trailer where it normally sat. Either Mike was in the can, or something had to be wrong. Mitch had a hunch it was the latter.

Hoisting himself up, Mitch perched himself precariously on the wobbly gate, straddling the three strands of barbed wire that ran along the post. *Not a very comfortable position*, he thought. Gaining some leverage, he rocked his body and pushed off over the gate, dropping into the yard.

Hands cupped around his eyes, he pressed his face up to the small window at the bay door. The shop was dark. Everything was in its place. The locked door confirmed the fact that Mike wasn’t there.

Making his way to the adjacent trailer, he banged on the flimsy door. Still no answer. He reached for the doorknob. It, too, was locked. But as he drew his hand away, the door clicked open. Mitch shot a guilty look toward the street, then pulled open the door and called, “Mike, you here?”

The bathroom was the only place in the small trailer outside of Mitch’s view. Dirty dishes cluttered the tiny stainless steel kitchen sink, providing nourishment to several dozen flies. Olive green carpet and color-coordinated curtains dated the place. The fold-out bed was down and unmade, and the trailer smelled moldy—in a dry sort of way. Mitch shooed at the flies buzzing around his face and rapped on the bathroom door. “Mike?” It seemed strange that Mike wouldn’t be here when his pickup was parked out in the yard. Mitch reached for the knob.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” a voice boomed. Mitch jumped and wheeled around. There, his head poked through the doorway, was Mike, a wide grin across his face. “Plugged toilet; smells like a dead rat in there.”

“Crud, Mike, you scared the crap out of me.”

Mike chuckled and swung the door wide. “That’s what you get for snoopin’ in another man’s castle.”

Mitch didn’t even crack a smile. “I wasn’t snooping.”

“You weren’t? Looked to me like you were about to open the door to my commode. What if I’d been in there on my throne?”

“It’s just that you didn’t answer, and your truck was here.”

“Lighten up, man. Givin’ you a hard time, is all. I just picked up a

customer's car and was bringing it back. You need a few tools for your trip?"

"If you don't mind." Mitch exited the trailer.

As they made for the shop, Mike pulled his greasy hair up over his thinning scalp and took his keys from his pocket. "What's up? The GTO still got you down?" He slowed his step to wait for Mitch, then reached over and gave him a slap on the back.

"No, I'm fine."

"Right. . . you are. You look like someone just killed your best friend." He fit the key in the door.

"Money's just a little tight."

"You were countin' on the sale of the goat to pay the bills, weren't you?"

Mitch nodded. "Rent's way past due; credit cards, too."

"Them cards'll screw you up somethin' awful. Don't own a one of 'em anymore. The ex and her cards got me in more trouble than I care to think about." Both men entered the shop and Mike flipped on the lights. "I've been askin' around about your car. I think I got a possible lead."

"Forget it. I already know who has it, and it's not worth the trouble."

Mike glared at the corner of the room, where a hidden, voice-activated camera took slow-motion pictures of their visit. Linked to a concealed microphone, the surveillance equipment recorded every move and word of their conversation. "Who do you think took it?"

"Doesn't matter. Best thing for me to do now is see if I can find a buyer for the Camaro."

"That's it? Mitch Wilson, state champ, four-point-O student, daddy-to-be's just gonna bend over and take a screwin' from some punk Mexican kid?"

"You trying to tick me off?" Mitch calmly asked. "Because if you are, it won't work. There's a lot more at stake than a car."

Mike stood with his back to the camera, his eyes doing a dance between Mitch and the garage door. "You ain't got the guts!" Mike sneered, his voice rising. "You're gonna let six months of your own sweat and blood drive away, and do nothin' about it." Mitch was staggered by the display. Mike *sounded* angry, but somehow his face didn't *look* angry.

Mitch was growing more confused by the second. "What's the mat-

ter, Mike?"

Mike bent over a tool chest drawer and began tossing tools into a canvas bag. As he did, he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "Just get mad at me and walk out. I'll explain later. . . ."

"What?"

"Walk out!" Mike banged the tools on the work bench. "Get the hell out!" He clenched his teeth and jaw.

Still puzzled by his boss's behavior, Mitch headed for the door. "Later," he said.

Mike snatched up the bag of tools and cut Mitch off. "Hold on—better take the tools!" Mitch stopped in the doorway, completely off balance. Mike slapped at the light switch, locked the door and walked silently toward the gate, Mitch in pursuit.

"What was that all about? You smelling too many paint fumes or something?"

Mike's voice lowered. "Just open your trunk and pretend like you're arguing with me. Trust me. . . ."

Mitch glanced around to see what the show was all about, then popped the trunk. The second it opened Mike flung the tools inside and slammed it down. Again, in contrast to his actions, his voice remained calm. "Now, get in . . . drive two blocks down and wait for me in front of Chandler's Electric. Got that?" He pumped his arms in a threatening gesture and waved Mitch off.

Mitch climbed in the car and backed away from the gate. *What in the world is going on? Bino talks like he's going to die, Mike's lost his mind . . . I don't need any more of this.* When he reached the electrical outlet he drove right on by. Then, about three blocks past, he pulled over to the curb to sort it all out. *Wait a minute. . . . How did Mike know the car thief was Mexican? I never told him that. . . . The last body and fender man went to work for Mike. What does he have to do with all this? I'm not a coward—I just can't take the risk. My kids aren't going to grow up without a dad. . . .* He wrestled with his thoughts, then asked himself, *What would Grandpa do? He'd fight, that's what.*

Mitch turned the car around and pulled up in front of Chandler's the same time Mike arrived. *I'll just see what he has to say.*

Mike obviously wasn't in the mood to pussy-foot around. "Park it and climb in."

"You're nuts. Not until you tell me what's going on."

Mike climbed from his car and walked around to the passenger door of the Escort, placing his forearms on the open window jamb. "I'm going to lose my butt for this. . . ." He took a deep breath. "Truth is, I'm *Federal Agent* Mike Hale." He pulled a badge from a garter strap at his calf.

"A cop!" Mitch opened the driver's door to climb out.

Mike stopped him. "Hear me out, Mitch. I couldn't talk in the shop because we were being monitored. I've wanted to bring you in and put you on our team. But the ASAC thinks you're as dirty as the next guy.

"ASAC?"

"Assistant Special Agent in Charge. Matter of fact, I'm the one who's kept the Vegas PD from picking you up for the armed robbery the other night."

"Dammit! I didn't rob anybody. Doesn't anybody understand? I saved the guy's life. He was about to blow his brains out."

"That's not how the conductor saw it."

Mitch's heart began to race. "Screw the conductor! All he saw was me trying to make sure the guy was okay."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"Look, the thing brought back some ugly memories, okay?"

"I've seen your file; I'll take your word for it. But we need to talk to my boss—both of us together."

"I thought you were my friend. This whole time you've been playing me . . ."

"Right now I'm your *only* friend. I just put my tail on the line to tell you what this is all about. If I don't lose my job or get demoted to some desk job it'll be a miracle."

"That's how you knew about the Mexican kid?"

"I'm the agent assigned to this case until I get into Vinnie's pocket, or even close. You're my only chance. I've been following you the last few days."

Mitch slammed his palm on the steering wheel, got out of the car, and slammed the door shut. "You've been spying on me?"

Mike leaned his arms on the little car, speaking across its roof. "Saw you jump the fence at the Husky the other night and scare the hell out of Bino. Saw you stop by his place this morning. . . . By now you know enough to get yourself killed."

"How does Bino fit into all this?"

"Can't say. Look, all you need to do is get me in the door. We'll

clear you of the possible armed robbery charges and try to get your car back. In the end, you walk away free and clear . . .”

“Free and clear my eye! Last time a cop told me that I got six months.”

“Won’t happen. I’ll take it to the press and force the issue, if I have to. I’ve been warning my boss you were going to get hurt over this thing from the beginning . . .”

“I’m already hurt. I’m about to get kicked out of my house, I’ve been lying to my wife, my car was stolen—along with nearly every tool I own—I think somebody’s been playing with my credit, and now you’re kicking my butt. I’ve got no protection at all, man.” Mitch raised his hands in the air to emphasize the point.

“Just get me in the door. That’s *all* you need to do. I give you my word.”

Mitch turned his back and sank down on the front fender. “What do you have in mind?”

“How soon is your flight?”

“What time is it?”

“Two.”

“Four hours.”

“Good, we’ve got time. If we can see Vinnie before you go, we’ll get a ticket for your wife and send you both out of town a few days.”

“No, no, no. I don’t want her involved in any of this.”

“All she’ll know is you’ve decided to take her with you—get a little R and R. With any luck, I’ll be in the door far enough to keep you clear when you get back.”

“With any luck. . . . And if you can’t get in the door?”

“We’ll deal with that when we come to it. Here, call Bino and tell him you need a job and a few bucks.” Mike drew out his phone and dialed.

“He won’t do it.”

“Tell him.” Mike handed over the phone.

Mitch held it to his ear and threw Mike a nasty look. The phone rang once and Bino answered.

“It’s Mitch. Say, I need that job you mentioned, and a loan.”

“Like I said . . . you’re over your head, kid. . . . Way over.” The phone clicked.

Mitch flicked the phone on the seat between them. “I told you—he

won't do it."

"Not so fast. You're going to need it."

"He told me he won't help. He's done stabbing his friends in the back."

Mike waited. The phone rang. "It's for you," he said.

Mitch punched "on" and raised the phone. "Yeah?"

"Three Queens . . . on Bridger. Dial 2113 . . . at the elevator." Bino hung up.

"Three Queens on Bridger," Mitch repeated.

Mike nodded. "That's Vinnie's thirteenth-floor penthouse. Now we're getting somewhere. Give him some song and dance about you changing your mind 'cause I'm going out of business and you'll be out of work. Look his shop over and tell him you need equipment. And make sure he knows we come as a package. . . . I'll supply all the equipment. Remind him that you'll be gone a week, but you can start right away when you get back. He'll want to talk to me about terms. Call me on this number." Mike jotted his cell number on a Post-it and slapped it on the dash. "Don't take his money. I'll wait for your call."

"But I've got to pay the rent."

"Don't worry. I'll have the agency take care of it tomorrow."

"I don't like this one bit."

"It'll be fine. I've never lost a snitch yet."

Mitch started to get back in his car. Mike tapped on the hood to offer one last word. "If anyone ever asks about the deal in the shop a few minutes ago, tell 'em you finally got pissed off enough about your car to do something about it."

TWENTY

THE ALLEY TEAM ASSEMBLED around Eddie's bed. Each gazed down forlornly at the broken, stick-figure body lying beneath the set of crisp, spotless sheets.

Ragged and tired, Greg gazed past Smitty's shoulder at the mirror above the hospital room sink, staring at his reflection. He looked pretty much like the rest of the shabby gang—possibly worse—with his week's growth of thick beard, splotchy, sunburned skin and unwashed hair. "*Oh how the mighty ones fall,*" he mused. The quietness of the room prompted him to ponder the sequence of events that had brought on his demise.

It'd all started innocently enough three years before at a New Orleans trade show. He'd had a few too many cocktails at the closing reception and was busy dropping a few dollars at the casino's craps table, when a skinny blonde slid her tiny pile of chips up next to his. Lo and behold, their number came up. Attached to the blonde, Greg noticed, was a pair of long legs, a slender figure, and a gorgeous smile. Afterwards, they got together for drinks. They didn't really do anything wrong, just a quick kiss when he won his first hundred bucks.

The whole tantalizing episode proved only to whet Greg's appetite for more. In a way, he'd hoped that one thing *would* lead to another, but by the time the night was over he was five thousand dollars in the hole, the blonde was kissing some other high-stakes patsy, and he'd slunk back to his room, tail between his legs, a kicked dog who'd had his first taste of blood. He spent the night licking his wounds—and dreaming of winning the jackpot, the leggy blonde at his side. . .

The following morning he'd found his sanity restored. His five thousand dollars, however, was still long gone. Returning home, he'd sat in conference with his minister, confessed his sins—both actual and those committed 'in his heart'—and vowed never again to set foot in a casino. The only problem was that that nasty, mesmerizing taste of

blood stayed with him, and grew more appealing as the days dragged on. He'd sit in his high-rise office, looking out across the valley at the hotels and casinos reaching ever higher on the Vegas horizon. Every day, week after week, the thrill of those first few wins grew bigger in his mind. Maybe it was the kiss, a sensual reward that came with the big score at the craps table, together with the titillating, frightening flicker of hope that the blonde trophy would wind up in his hotel room that night. Maybe it was her putting her chips on his number, and the number coming up. Any way he looked at it, he'd sipped from an intoxicating cocktail, and now he was hooked—in more ways than one. He, the casino and the blonde were a threesome, his thoughts always on the lookout for more excitement.

His minister had counseled him to pray to overcome his weaknesses, and he had. Day after drawn-out day, night after miserable night, he prayed. But each time he'd allow his thoughts to wander back to the image of that captivating blonde posing under the harsh casino lights. Why hadn't he quit when he was up two thousand, bought her a drink, and . . . no, he wasn't going there again. He'd already been there hundreds of times in his mind.

It was the base thoughts, or perhaps the illusion of power, that finally dragged him back to the Strip, back to bondage. He was just going to check out some obscure casino, roll a few dice, blow fifty or a hundred bucks, and dispel, once and for all, the notion it could have been any different. Then he could weed the whole thing out of his mind. But, by some lucky curse, an hour later he walked out four hundred obscene dollars richer.

Of course it was chump change. Linda, his wife, hadn't even missed the five thousand he'd lost in New Orleans. Or if she did, she hadn't said a word about it. She was too busy spending the big bucks his Yahoo stock was bringing in. She relished having her own line of credit cards; seven to be exact. His six made thirteen between them, with four or five new offers coming in the mail every day. Skymile cards, car-rental cards, shopping-spree cards, vacation cards . . . they had them all. The new house on the edge of the country club golf course and two luxury cars in the garage were any man's dream. But somehow it wasn't enough. The giddiness of a simple craps game and the danger of a skinny blonde called to the animal in him.

On his way home that night, he'd swung by two other of the smaller casinos—won a little, lost a little—but no heart-stopping blondes ever

scooted their chips up next to his. That's when he decided that either the dream needed to die or it needed a fresh thrill to help maintain its luster.

The luster came in the form of a phone number. A day or two later, while looking up the number for Kitto's Take-out, there, jumping off the page and splashing in his face, were the words *Kitty's Escort Services*. On impulse, he dialed the number. "Hello, Kitty's . . ." the sultry voice had purred. But at that moment his conscience had kicked in, almost a sense of panic, and he hurriedly hung up the phone. A second call three days later got him as far as asking if they had any tall, skinny blonde girls with beautiful smiles. They referred him to their website, and that's when trouble started hitting the fan big time. . . .

It was Sound who dragged Greg back from his memories. "Look he's waking up!"

Eddie opened one puffy eye, the other being too swollen to budge. The groggy old fighter eyed the horde of hazy faces, groaned, then lapsed back into unconsciousness.

Mitch pulled up to the main lobby of Three Queens and parked his car in the ten-minute zone. A young pimple-faced valet scampered from the front door to meet him. "Sir, I need to ask you to move. That space is reserved for a guest of Mr. Domenico's."

Already standing outside the car, Mitch responded, "Maybe *I'm* his guest."

"Are you Mr. Wilson?" Mitch nodded. "So sorry, sir. If you'll let me take your keys, I can park your car."

"What's wrong with where it's at?"

"Nothing, sir, I've just been instructed to treat you *extra* good."

Mitch wasn't at all that keen on accepting any favors from Vinnie. "Then leave me and the car alone." He reached for the front door.

"Now you wouldn't want me to lose my job, would you?" the young man replied. "No charge, no tips." He stuck out his hand, palm up.

Mitch looked the kid in the eye. He was serious. "You'd lose your job?"

"It's only my second day."

Mitch reached in his pocket and tossed him the keys.

The young valet grinned. "Thanks, man—I mean, sir. I'll take good care of it."

At the elevator Mitch dialed 2113. Vinnie picked up. "Mitch, glad

you came.” Mitch stepped into the elevator and glowered up at the camera in the upper corner. The lights in the panel blinked to twelve, the highest number, but didn’t stop until the floor above that. When its doors parted, Mitch stepped out onto a plush white mat of carpet that blanketed the expansive penthouse office. Vinnie pushed back on his white leather executive chair and stood to greet his guest.

Modern art adorned the walls. Luxurious, all-white couches and chrome-and-glass tables rested on leopard-skin throw rugs, each facing inward where a large-screen digital computer sat mounted in a see-through glass desk. Miscellaneous tables and bookstands were scattered in odd locations around the room. On them stood nude figurines, cast in bronze.

“Welcome,” Vinnie said, smiling. “So you had a change of heart. Take a seat.” He pointed to an over-stuffed easy chair. “What can I get you to drink?” Sophistication and Vinnie’s tough-guy attitude and Jersey accent didn’t make for much of a match.

“Nothing, thanks,” Mitch said, a little terse.

“A hot spring day in the desert and you ain’t thirsty?”

“I don’t drink.”

“A man with self control. . . . How’s about a soda?”

“Pepsi.”

Vinnie pulled two sodas from the wet-bar fridge and took a seat on the couch across from Mitch. “The glass shows every little thing,” he said, placing a Three Queens coaster on the coffee table. “Now, how can I help you?”

“You mentioned something about a job the other day . . .”

“Right. Offered good money, generous perks.”

“The offer still open?”

“Yeah, the job’s still available, but deals change. Little thing called supply and demand. Or better yet, leverage. From what I hear, Mike’s shop is closin’ down.”

“Guess so.”

Vinnie smiled. “Tough break, kid.”

Mitch decided the clown was having too much fun and steered the subject away from compensation. “What kind of equipment do you have?”

“The best. Just upgraded the place a year ago. Wanna see it?”

“Before considering a job I always take a *long* look at the working

conditions.”

“Good. I like a man to know exactly what he’s gettin’ into.” Both men stood and Vinnie drew his suit coat from the back of his desk chair.

Greg wandered from Eddie’s room to find a place to rest from his all-night rescue. The Alley Team, at the insistence of the head nurse of the unit, had placed Nurse in the empty bed next to Eddie’s. One of the orderlies who frequently came by the room to check on Eddie seemed more interested in Nurse and the Alley Team than in his patient.

Leaning his head against the wall, Greg’s thoughts once more began to drift. *The website. I never should have looked at it.*

Sure enough, Kitty’s site had featured a long-legged, skinny blonde. She wasn’t nearly as stunning as the girl in New Orleans, but it didn’t take long for his fantasy to replace the mythical face and dazzling smile with one he could actually look at. “Rayna” was her chatroom name, and boy did she know her stuff, all the right buttons to push to keep him coming back for more. His computer romps were listed as “professional services” on his credit cards, and Greg made sure he was always the one to pay the bills.

By that time Linda was basking in their wealth and had joined several clubs and women’s groups, while still faithfully serving on the PTA. She remained active in her church as well, even as Greg’s activity dwindled.

Soon the Yahoo stock, like most other technology stocks, was riding the roller-coaster wave of up-and-down gains and losses. His broker assured him it was only temporary, to just hang in there and ride it out. But shortly blue chip prices began dropping and he had to lay off several key positions. Through it all, his boss assured him that his own job would not be affected. That’s when the strange sequence of calls had started. At first he’d dismissed them simply as mistaken identity. No, he didn’t live on La Jolla Avenue, and never had. . . .

During one of his chatroom forays, Greg had mentioned to Rayna about his New Orleans fantasy. It was she who’d suggested they give it a try. They could meet at the little-known Three Queens, shoot a few craps, and see if there was any chemistry. If only she’d known what kind of chemistry would be unleashed. . . . If Greg’s wife had only known. Indeed, when he was with her, he found himself constantly

thinking of Rayna. Too many times he pushed his luck, until finally he pushed it right over the edge . . .

“Excuse me. Excuse me, sir, you can’t sleep in here. Sir!”

Greg’s eyes opened. A square-jawed nurse was shaking his leg. “What?” He sat up and dusted the visions from his head.

“You can’t sleep here,” the nurse frowned, her jowls quaking. “This is a hospital waiting room, not a YMCA. I need to ask you to leave. There’s a policy against loitering on hospital premises . . .”

“I’m not loitering. I’m . . . I’m here visiting a friend.”

“Come on; up you go.” The brawny nurse tugged at Greg’s threadbare shirt until he was on his feet. “Don’t give me any trouble, or I’ll call security. . . .” Her hand on his shoulder, she guided him in the direction of the elevators. “Come on now, out, out, out!” She pressed the ‘Down’ button.

He hobbled into the elevator and slouched against the wall, abandoned. His legs felt rubbery; his eyes sunken and hollow from lack of sleep. When the elevator jarred to a stop on the main floor, the throng waiting to enter the elevator parted to let him out. Neither nurse, orderly or visitor wanted to be within ten feet of him. The stares and snickers were arrows piercing his splintered soul.

The sun beat down unmercifully on the side of the old building. Painted on its brick facade were the faded and peeling words “Carson Body Works,” named for the street it was housed on—the same street as Eddie’s Gym, Kitty’s Escort Services, American Bio Medical, and half a dozen other fronts. Carson Street ran one block south of Bridger, both of which shared the alley with the parking structure of Three Queens.

The two men halted in front of the metal door. Vinnie punched in its security code. “Can’t be too careful these days,” he remarked as his thumb entered a second code into the alarm keypad. “I don’t come here much. Matter of fact, after you start work you won’t see me here again. See, I plan on making you the head man. Your name’ll even appear on the lease. I’m just the landlord, far as you’re concerned.”

The spacious shop was clean and mostly empty, excepting the equipment, which, at first glance, appeared top-of-the-line. “I thought you had a few employees.”

“Had a hard time keeping it rented, but I never once tried to run the

place. Bought the equipment from the original owner; brought it up to standards and leased it as a package.”

“You said you’d pay a salary.”

“I’ll supply enough referral work for the shop to make money. The rest’ll be up to you.”

“I’m going to need some help, and some additional tools.”

“Your call. What’d you have in mind?”

“Mike. He’s closing shop. I don’t see any frame equipment here . . .”

“Haven’t had much need for it—nor do I see any need for a second-rate body man. My work’s strictly restoration.”

Mitch swallowed. “I need it—and him.” He lowered his chin and swallowed again, trying to keep his voice modulated. “He could get the shop set up while I’m out of town at vocational finals.”

“Oh, yeah, the competition.” Vinnie pursed his lips and nodded in thought. “Bino told me you was a real hot-shot at state. Where’d you learn it?”

“An old man I know. . . . Now about the frame equipment and Mike.”

Vinnie thrust his hands in his suit-pant pockets and momentarily turned his back. Then he wheeled and faced Mitch, smiling. “I think it’ll work out fine. I’ll make you both part of the contract. Why don’t you give Mike a call and have him come down. Phone’s on the back wall. . . . Listen, I got a little business to see to. When he gets here, the two of youse look around and see if he likes the place. We’ll finish up when I get back.” He turned towards the exit. “Oh.” He spun back around. “Take a look at the paint booth. The best money can buy. I’ll show you how it works later.” With that, Vinnie walked out, slamming the heavy door behind him.

Mitch made the call, thoughts of how to get his tail out of the ugly mess he was in far out-weighting his recent domestic squabble.

The Bible resting on her tummy slipped to the floor with a thud. “Mitch? Is that you?” she called out in a sleepy voice. The reading had lulled her into a peaceful Sunday afternoon nap. She stirred again. “Mitch?” Sitting up and massaging at her kinked neck, a stretch and a yawn brought her the rest of the way to her feet. After checking the garage to see if the Escort was back, she looked at the time. *Four o’ clock. I’ve been asleep three hours.*

It wasn’t like Mitch to be gone so long without phoning her. *Something’s*

going on. She reflected on the situation. *Money pressures . . . short temper . . . he took my car . . . and now he's going on a trip.* She smiled. *"That's it!"* Mitch's problems weren't money-related. To him, money wasn't that big a deal—only a slight irritant. But he'd never been on an airplane before. That was it—he was afraid of flying! Often he'd make subtle comments about the dangers involved. An airplane, after all, "is just a machine," he'd say, "a pile of nuts and bolts put together by an underpaid mechanic and flown by an overworked pilot." There were just "too many things that could go wrong up there. . . ."

With the exception of a few butterflies just before their wedding, Stephanie had never seen her husband afraid of anything. The thought of having children, him going back to school, their renting a house in a terrible neighborhood—he'd never batted an eye. He'd taken on rusty old jalopies that should have been cut up for scrap and made them look like new. Dogs, the local gangs, even going to the state competition . . . they didn't bother him in the least.

But in getting ready for the trip Mitch had been considerably more antsy, even finicky. He'd moved out the GTO, given her her own garage door opener, had constantly warned her about Al Kostecki. They all related to the trip. She knew a little about psychology and human behavior from her freshman year of college. Mitch, having lost his father, was feeling a bit of separation anxiety. *It has to be that*, she decided, a renewed spring in her step.

From the hospital's main lobby Greg made his way out the door and found a quiet spot in the courtyard, where he lay under a tree. He relaxed the muscles in his face. An hour or two snooze is just what the doctor ordered. Besides, he'd never even officially met Eddie. His being there might only serve to confuse the old man when he did wake up.

He stared up at the leaves fluttering in the dry, desert wind. Ninety degrees was almost tolerable in the shade, but the scorching summer, just around the corner—that's when it would get miserable. So far Greg had found being homeless less work than being employed. He squeezed his eyes shut and pictured his children. Devin, a fourth grader, had been looking forward to his summer vacation. He dreaded going back each fall. On the contrary, Larine, his eight-year-old, never wanted school to end. She drank it up. She particularly loved reading, which was probably a result of Linda's hour of bedtime stories each night.

What a woman, he thought. *How on earth could I have done what I did to her and the kids?* It was just last summer, ten months earlier. He'd parked behind Three Queens and entered through the back. Rayna would recognize him by his khaki slacks and light green golf shirt. He'd never been so scared in his life. He'd tried to wrestle his wedding band from his ring finger just minutes before—to no avail. Then his trembling, sweaty hands clutched a stack of ten-dollar chips. As per plan, he sauntered over to one of the craps table and leaned over to place his bet . . .

The noise from the children's psych ward filled the quiet courtyard, adding a suitably riotous backdrop to Greg's daydream. "Ten dollars on 13." The bet was lost. He'd stepped to another table. "Twenty on 13."

"A hundred on thirteen," a soft voice cooed. He could almost feel the sumptuous heat at his side . . .

"I told you, no loitering on hospital premises." Greg felt the brunt of a sharp kick on the bottom of his heel. "This is the same stinkin' bum I kicked off the fifth floor." This time the square-jawed nurse was accompanied by a security guard, who bent to help Greg to his feet.

"Come on, buddy. Let me help you out," the guard said in a tone much more forgiving than that of the nurse.

"Wash your hands after you touch him," sneered the nurse as Greg was escorted from the courtyard. "You never can tell what he might have."

The old guard's grip slackened on Greg's arm. "The woman's a witch. Don't know why they keep her around," he whispered. "I can't imagine she helps those poor kids none, either. Look, buddy, help me out a little and try to stay away the next twelve hours while she's on shift. It'll make both our lives easier."

TWENTY-ONE

STATE OF THE ART was an understatement, as far as the paint booth was concerned. After finding the light switch, Mitch wandered in, out and around the high-tech room. Back home he and his grandpa had rigged up a big fan and a few make-shift filters to keep the dust off a new paint job. They'd also discovered that if they took a hose and squirted down the floor before they painted, it helped keep the dust down. That was about as 'high-tech' as it got.

The college spray booth had been a more fancy setup. Equipped with halogen lights, a bank of filters, semi-clean floor and walls, and a fan that exchanged the air every few minutes, it was a major step up. But this room was off the charts. A series of heavy plastic grates formed the floor. This grid was built up off the plastic pan to allow the air to be pulled down through and circulated to the outside. The walls, bolted to a heavy metal frame, were made of the same tough plastic, kind of a Teflon composite, slick and dust-proof. And the room was spotless.

"Where's Vinnie?" Mike asked, spinning Mitch on his heels. "His car's out front." Apparently the guy had a habit of sneaking up on people. It must be the Federal agent in him, Mitch decided.

"I don't know, but you ought to take a look at this booth. Makes yours look like the inside of a garbage can. Odd thing is, there isn't any air intake, just these little nozzles everywhere."

"A down-draft setup of some sort . . ."

"Forced air, to be exact." Vinnie stepped into the paint booth behind Mike. "'Positive pressure,' they call it. This one's customized. I had them add in a paint-stripping system. Actually, it was Jimmy's idea." He shook his head. "Shame he got to use it just that once. . . ."

An uneasy chill washed over Mike. He hadn't been able to reach Agent Barnes to tell him where he was going. He had called and left word with division, but if trouble arose they wouldn't be much use since the case wasn't yet priority status and Mitch wasn't officially an

operative.

“You remember Jimmy, don’t you, Mike?” Vinnie pulled the door shut, his face a cruel mask, one hand in his jacket pocket, the other on the door to the booth. Not a shred of his earlier cordiality remained. His heels clicking softly on the grate-work, he sidled up to within three feet of Mike. “Poor Jimmy. I invited him down to look over the new system. Asked him if he wanted his old job back. Told him I’d double what you was payin’ him. . . . Reminded him we had a *contract*.”

Mitch stood, paralyzed, at the far end of the booth, the tension thick, palpable. His chest was heavy, his knees weak. “I’ve got a—a flight to catch,” he stammered. “Can we get on with the contract so I can get going?”

Mike, his eyes wide with fear, grimaced at Mitch as if to tell him to “Shut up!”, Vinnie took advantage of the split-second distraction. With cat-quick reflexes, he whipped a plastic bag-encased gun from his pocket, pressed it to Mike’s temple and pulled the trigger. Mitch’s question echoed faintly, then the room fell into a deafening silence.

Mitch finally persuaded himself to blink. Then he looked on helplessly at the horrifying, rapid-fire sequence unfolding before his eyes. Only one of Mike’s eyes remained focused on Mitch. The unreal gaze told all: every bit of shock and terror, anger and anguish, pain and regret were wrapped in that one grave stare. Then his eyes squeezed shut and his legs buckled beneath him. Sagging to the right, his left hand curled across his torso in a fruitless effort to break his fall.

Through it all, Mitch’s feet had remained glued to the floor, his gaze now fixed on the grotesquely slumped figure. When what seemed like hours had passed, his eyeballs swivelled to take in Vinnie, his hand covered with a latex glove. A few drops of blood were sprayed across his hard face and down his silk suit. He stepped close, squatted low and peered into Mike’s face, and asked, “You a cop, Mike?”

Mike, in an instant, no longer saw the hard face of the cold-blooded killer, but felt the emotions as his failing mind scanned the memories of 40 plus years. They surged through his heart and thoughts. He saw his grandmother sitting on the porch of her old farm house waiting for his family to arrive for a visit, his bride waiting at the alter, the sadness of his first dogs passing having been struck by a car in front of his fathers home. The visions tightened and narrowed like a funnel as the blackness began to close in.

Vinnie reached down and patted the dying man’s chest, a tinge of regret

in the gesture. "A .38 never was my first choice in a hand gun." Then he raised the weapon again. Mitch turned away. A second blast went off, sending shock waves reverberating throughout the tiny room. When the thunder-claps had ceased, Vinnie's cold complaints erupted in Mitch's ringing ears. "Damn! Another thousand-dollar suit down the drain!"

Mitch cast another ill-advised glance at the body, a lapse of judgement he would regret. A jolt of nausea tore into him. He fell to his knees and started to retch.

Vinnie stood over him, grinning. "What's the matter, kid? You said you wanted to sign the contract, didn't you?" He turned and walked back near the door. He removed his jacket and dropped it on the floor in front of the stricken man. "I did the same thing first time I saw someone's brains leakin' outta their head. I was twelve. The old man slapped me 'side a' the head . . . told me to toughen up." He kicked off his shoes and shook the plastic bag that held the weapon. "See this gun?" Vinnie shook the bag again. "Like I was sayin' I swore out loud I'd kill the old man for what he did. He told me when I was good enough to do it, the time'd be right for me to take over the business." After removing a small package from his pocket and putting it between his teeth, the killer dropped his pants. Then he tossed the gun, bag and all, on top of the crumpled pile.

Mitch didn't answer or look up. He just knelt there, numb from what he had just seen.

Vinnie continued to undress until he was down to nothing but his boxer shorts and socks, and a large-caliber, holstered gun suspended over his shoulder. Taking the package from his teeth, he tore it open. Inside was a disposable towel, with which he started to wipe himself down. "Hey, I asked you a question. Ever seen that gun before?"

Mitch stared down at the .38, unable to speak. It did look slightly familiar. Vinnie turned his back and stepped from the booth. Mitch's gaze fell on the door, back on the gun. He closed his hand into a hard fist to stop it from shaking. Then, assuming a crouching position, he inched his way forward.

Vinnie stepped back in the doorway and hung a garment bag on the open door. "Go ahead, kid. If you think you're good enough." He unzipped the bag. "The gun came from your Camaro. One a' my boys found it—same day he picked up the title to the GTO." Draping a fresh blue shirt over his shoulders, he added, "I'm bettin' your prints are all over

it. If they are, you just killed your cop friend. If they ain't, you walk outta here a hero when you tell the cops what you saw. Be your word against mine. Course, *I* never been busted for armed robbery and the cops ain't lookin' for *my* red Camaro. So who do you think they're gonna believe?" Vinnie pulled on some pants and snapped the suspenders at his chest. He pulled his gun up and strapped it down, then dropped a new pair of shoes to the floor and stepped into them. By this time Mitch had shaken off the sick feeling that was tearing him in two. Vinnie—again changing face as rapidly as he'd changed his clothes—reached up and tapped on the wall. "This booth, here, can take the paint off a car in thirty seconds," began the seemingly unfazed, cold-blooded killer. "After the paint stripper has done its job, a high-pressure blast a' soap and water from the same nozzles rinses and neutralizes the natural-based paint remover. With Jimmy, I ran out a' stripper. All that was left was a bag a' bones. Gathered 'em up and scattered 'em in the desert. See, I always take care of the details personally. That way I don't have any reason to stay awake nights worryin'. But you, my friend, have a lot to worry about. That beautiful lady a' yours . . . ain't she been tryin' to choose baby names?"

Mitch clambered to his feet. Teeth clenched and nostrils flaring, he snarled, "You stay away from her!"

"Like I said, I always take care a' the details—personally."

Mitch made a move for the pistol on the floor. Within a fraction of a second, Vinnie had drawn his large caliber gun and hunkered down at Mitch's side. Grabbing him by the hair, he jammed the gun into his patsy's cheek. "Like my daddy said to me, I'm sayin' to you: When you think you're good enough, the business is yours. Meantime, I suggest you take that trip to the finals and give our new partnership some thought."

Vinnie gave a grunt, shoved Mitch's head forward, put the gun away and pulled his jacket straight at the collar. Then he pointed at the door. "Out front to the right, past Eddie's Gym, turn at the alley and you'll be in back a' Three Queens' parking. Have the valet bring your car to the front of the hotel. I got a few details to tend to."

Still in shock, Mitch hesitated, then stumbled past Mike's body, still staring at the revolver nestled atop the heap of clothes. If he'd just gone to the police in the first place, or even waited while the old engineer had called them, Mike would still be alive. Out of the body shop he went, down Carson Avenue past Eddie's Gym, and turned into the clut-

tered alley. It was as if he were floating above the ground; the whole thing seemed like some terrible nightmare.

Vinnie, meanwhile, still in the shop, carefully removed several strands of Mitch's hair from his fist and tucked them between Mike's limp fingers. Several more he twined in the buckle of the dead man's watchband. After pulling on a bulky pair of plastic coveralls, he walked to the back overhead door and pushed it up. Stephanie's little car sat in the alley. Starting it up, he pulled it inside the building and closed the door.

Wallowing in turbulent thought, Mitch staggered behind the gym, teetered against the dumpster, and collapsed against the wall of the old building. The two most harrowing moments of his life collided in the recesses of his head as the battered door of memories fell from its rusty hinges. A torrent of horror, grief and sorrow tore at his throat like a trio of demons.

Mitch slid down the brick wall to a sitting position and rested his head on his knees. He struggled to take a breath, a cleansing breath, any breath. For some reason he felt dirty, completely and utterly contaminated. In his mind he fought to fast-forward the videotape, to ease the vivid burden of a seven-year-old boy finding his father in the garage, dead.

"I hate him! I hate him!" Mitch remembered yelling on their way home from the school play. His dad had promised to be there "no matter what."

"I'm sure he wanted to, dear. Something must have come up."

"That's what you always say. You're always making excuses for him."

"That's enough, Mitchell! Your father's under a lot of stress right now."

"How do you know?"

"I beg your pardon, young man."

"I hear you fighting. You ask what's wrong. He says everything's okay and not to worry. Then you cry. It makes me mad. I hate him!"

Replaying the scene for the thousandth time, Mitch hopped from the car and slammed the door, his mother calling after him.

For some reason the garage door wouldn't open. Again and again he'd hit it with his fist, the bottled-up emotions spilling over. Even a seven-year-old had been able to tell that something was dreadfully wrong, espe-

cially during those last few months—but no one was willing to talk about it. His dad had buried himself in his work, and the harder he worked the less time he'd given his son.

Mitch raised his head from his knees, his eyes, bathed in tears of anguish, still clamped shut. It felt like he'd stepped out of his body, and now he was reliving those frightful minutes that had so altered his life, releasing all the jumbled emotions he'd kept stashed away for 15 years. The adult Mitch dropped his head back to his knees.

"Mitchell Wilson, you better not upset your father again!" she'd called out as he bolted through the front door. *"I'm warning you, young man, he has enough to worry about without you nagging him, too."*

Mitchell had slammed the front door behind him and headed for the garage. Maybe his father would notice him if he fixed the door or crashed on his bike or something. He surely hadn't cared about any other of his accomplishments lately. *"I'll show him,"* the boy sputtered as he threw open the door from the kitchen. In the shadows, his dad appeared as if he was asleep at the wheel. Mitchell remembered the sandpapery sound his feet made when they had tromped down the steps. How could he be sleeping at a time like this? *"Dad, you promised!"* he'd cried, and opened the door. Immediately, he knew something was terribly wrong. He reached to tug on his father's sleeve, when he heard his mother burst into the garage.

"Mitchell, no!" The boy's gaze had turned for a split second, then returned to his father—whose limp, blood-smattered body slumped from the cab. It seemed to come at him in slow motion, collapsing on top of him, trapping the boy's gangly legs beneath the heavy torso. As it fell, the pistol in his father's hand hit the floor and exploded, sending a bullet whizzing past Mitchell's head. Even over the gun's report, Mitch remembered the sound his father's head made when it struck the concrete floor, the distorted face bouncing next to his own. Open lifeless eyes staring into his own.

Mitch's face turned upward and his eyes sprang open. There was blue sky above. "No!" he screamed, his fists slapping the pavement. "No!" The horrific howls reverberated down the alley, to where Greg Hart neared the carpet-covered entrance to Nurse's shelter. The hair on his arms stood on end. He'd thought he was alone in the sweltering, afternoon heat.

"Who's there?" he called back. No one answered. Greg surveyed the

alley. The shrill sound had come from close by. Kneeling low, he peeked under the greasy frame of Eddie's old Ford, then around the corner of the garbage bin.

Blind to the fact someone had heard him, Mitch was still trapped in his hideous, hypnotic trance. As she pulled her terrified son from the garage, his mother had screamed, "*No Mitchell, I told you no! Now look what you've done!*"

A hand touched him on the arm. The scream suddenly became the voice of a man, asking, "You okay, bud?"

Greg stood over the trembling man. "Hey, buddy, you alright?" he repeated.

Mitch's head shot up, smacking hard against the brick wall. His eyes inflamed and swollen, he stared up into the man's kind but unkept face. "Fine," he answered. "I'm . . . fine."

Greg stepped back to give the dazed man some room. "Can I give you a hand?"

"No. . . No." Mitch trembled like a child, blinked hard, and ran his hand—raw at the knuckles—through his hair and down the back of his newly bruised scalp. "I've got to go." He dragged himself to his feet and lit out up the alley, climbed the concrete barrier to the parking lot and disappeared between the rows of parked cars.

Wondering where he'd seen the face before, Greg rested against the wall, still weary from lack of sleep. The rattling of an overhead garage door captured his attention. He peered between the dumpster and the protruding wall of the adjacent building. At the end of the alleyway, Greg saw a gangster-type man poke his head from a bay door, his eyes scouring its dark recesses in a cold stare. A few seconds later, a white Escort rolled from the shop into the alley. The man climbed from the car wearing a pair of white coveralls and began to strip a pair of latex gloves from his hands. Disappearing back inside, the bay door cranked shut.

Summoning the energy, Greg staggered from the wall and weaved his way down the alley. The fleeting thoughts of better times, clean socks, a shower, and a craving for some of the simple comforts he'd once enjoyed gnawed at his memory, like the stiff leather rubbing against the open sores on his feet. He yanked at the frayed laces and removed the shoes. The slap of eager tennis shoes against pavement again caught his gaze. Down where the Escort was parked, a pimple-faced kid in

a green jacket climbed inside, gunned the little motor, drove the puttering car past Greg and out onto the street.

Barefoot, Greg tiptoed across the alley and climbed into the sweltering yet secluded comfort of Nurse's home. In a matter of moments his thoughts traversed the breach of time, from what he'd given up through greed and lust to the stark reality of his current state. The soiled linens upon which he lay supplied the painfully stark reminder. Greg lay still, hovering between the twilight moments of thought before restful slumber transports the mind into a fantasy world.

His credit card troubles had only just begun when the phone calls started. Then came the call that would ruin his life. At first Greg thought it was simply a mistaken address. Before he knew what had hit him, he was fighting off an aggressive campaign of five different collection agencies, each trying to recover its massive losses.

Videotapes from Three Queens and the other casinos had been beyond compelling. The courts were convinced he'd been leading a double life. The public Greg Hart was the devoted family man, aggressive executive, sophisticated stockholder. The private Greg Hart was the wild ladies' man carousing with a known sex offender and obsessed with gambling, booze and spending. The damning testimony from Rayna and the resulting confession to his wife of his infidelity had sealed his fate.

Unfortunately for him, the apartment on La Jolla was vacated and emptied of its elaborate, card-purchased furnishings before any serious investigation was begun. The slight differences in signatures was easily explained away by Greg's drunken lifestyle. And the late-night hours he kept building a struggling company was colored as an alibi for his extracurricular activities. His only outright confession of guilt had been of his one-and-only foolish 'visit' with Rayna. Other than that, he'd declared his innocence on all the other charges.

Greg tossed and turned as twilight fell into sullen darkness. Before too much longer, rest had become deep sleep. Still, the nightmare continued to play out over and over again in his mind.

TWENTY-TWO

THE DEATH GRIP he had on the steering wheel was completely subconscious. Mitch, from under the canopy of Three Queens, stared straight ahead, past the coming and going guests, past the traffic and the line of taxi cabs on Bridger, past the pimple-faced valet standing beside his car, past the ugly images burned on the back of his eyelids. His gaze was fixed on a phone booth across the street. If he had any chance of solving the spate of new problems that had collapsed all around him, old emotions, he decided, had to be reined in. Twice he'd chosen to run from his problems and twice it had been to his demise. Now he was through running. Mike deserved more than an acid bath on the floor of a paint booth, and Mitch wasn't about to take the fall for Vinnie's vicious murder. But he couldn't allow Stephanie to get hurt, either. So, what next? Vinnie had him positioned squarely between the viselike grip he held and the confinements of the pending law.

Mitch sighed deeply. His father had failed to deal positively with adversity; his mother, too, to a lesser extent. And though Mitch recognized he wasn't to blame for either of their actions, the seven-year-old in him still carried the guilt. The anger and suffering and despair and hopelessness he felt after his father's death had never gone away.

Grandpa was the strong one of the family. Backed into a corner, Mitch's old role model seemed to tackle a good fight like a seasoned veteran. Hard work and determination, employed smartly, that's what would save a man. He often turned to his tiger analogy to illustrate. "It's like grabbing a tiger by the tail," he'd preach in his gruffest voice. "Don't grab on 'less you're willin' to hold tight 'til it's over. Just 'cause you want to quit fightin' doesn't mean the tiger does. So take a good look before grabbin' hold. If it's right to fight, you'll feel it in your gut. If it ain't, then swallow your pride and let it pass."

Mitch could feel it, all right, smack dab in the center of his gut—and in his veins and in his head. The 'tiger' within was more than willing to fight.

“Something wrong, Mr. Wilson?” the young valet asked through the open window.

Mitch snapped his head to the side. “You got a couple quarters?”

The kid bent at the waist and squinted through the window, his youthful ears mulling over what he’d heard. “Quarters?”

“I need to make a call.”

“Sure.” The kid dug into his pockets and pressed two coins through the window. Mitch snatched them up, then started the car and pulled away. “You’re welcome!” the kid hollered after him.

The accelerating little car struck bottom when Mitch hit the road. The thin traffic was pure luck as he sailed across four lanes without looking either left or right. Skidding to a stop, he jumped to the curb and rammed the coins in the phone slot. The words surged from his lungs. “I need to report a murder.”

“Who’s calling?” asked the police dispatcher.

“There’s no time. The killer’s name is Vincent Domenico and he’s trying to destroy the body with acid. His red Ferrari’s parked in front of Carson Body Works on West Carson. Hurry!” Mitch slammed down the phone. Every muscle in his body screamed for him to run; every fiber of his being told him to stay and fight. But how? *If Vinnie was destroying the evidence, and they caught him in the act, both of us would be implicated,* Mitch reasoned. *If, on the other hand, he wanted me arrested, he would’ve called the cops already. So why hasn’t he?*

Mitch maneuvered the Escort partway around the block, shut off the engine, slid low in his seat, and peered down Carson to where Vinnie’s car was still parked. Just then Vinnie, carrying a garment bag, came out of the shop door. He opened the Ferrari’s trunk and lay the bag inside. Glaring down the street toward the Escort, he secured the trunk and pulled his cell phone from his jacket.

The sound of a phone’s musical call wrenched Mitch’s attention from the street—and the three Las Vegas PD patrol cars, lights flashing, that squealed up in front of the building. What was a phone doing in the car? Unnerved, Mitch exhumed the Mozart-playing gadget from under the front seat and, punching the “Answer” button, pressed the phone to his ear.

“Shame on you kid. Don’t care much about your woman?” Mitch glanced down the street. Vinnie was smiling at him over the hood of one of the police cars. “Hope you get to her before Frankie does. . . . Well, looks like I gotta go. Call me if you need any help with the details. You got his phone

now.” Vinnie terminated the call and raised his hands in the air.

Mitch, unnerved by the sudden turn of events, gunned the Escort and aimed it towards home. He could hardly breathe. He stared down at the phone, still in his hand. It *was* Mike’s. With the gas pedal pressed to the floor, he dialed home. “Stef!” he said as calmly as he could.

“Mitch, where have you been?” The reply was sharp.

“I don’t have time to explain. Is everything all right?”

“Not exactly.” Stephanie paused, trying to decide if she should hold her tongue or let him have it for the cold meal sitting on the stove.

“What do you mean ‘not exactly’?”

“It’s nothing. How soon will you be home?”

“Is anyone there?” The urgency in his voice was evident.

“No. Mitch . . . what’s going on?”

“You sure? You sound a little tense.” Mitch was almost yelling.

A short silence ensued. “It’s just that the food is cold—that’s what’s the matter. And you’re yelling at me again!” More than a trace of anger had surfaced. “What’s the matter with you? You took my car, you made me miss church . . . as if you even care!”

“I’m sorry, Stef, it’s just . . .” Mitch breathed out a bevy of frustrations and fears. What could he tell her? Someone was on the way over to do her in, is that what he should say? “Listen, I’ve decided not to go on this trip. Make sure the doors are locked and don’t let anyone in until I get there, okay? I’m only a few minutes away.”

This was the most severe—and strangest—case of separation anxiety Stephanie had ever heard of. “You’re not going? Hey, it’s alright. Nothing’s going to happen to me. You need to go and win the title . . .”

The sternness in her husband’s voice hiked up a notch. “We can talk about it as soon as I get home! Just keep the doors locked. Got that?” Then he hung up.

Stephanie sank into the couch. According to what she’d read, the only way to overcome an anxiety disorder was to plow ahead, get it behind you. She dialed Maggie’s number. “Hi, how was your day?”

“Well, Stephanie. It was nice. I had a wonderful morning at church and now my youngest daughter’s here to visit . . .”

“Oh, I’ll call back when you’re not with family.”

“Don’t be silly, dear, you’re family too. In fact, I was just thinking about you. How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good.”

“And how was church?”

“I didn’t make it. That’s why I called. I think Mitch is having a hard time leaving on this trip. He’s been on edge the last few days.”

“Hmm.”

“I think it’s because of our loser-of-a-neighbor. Oh . . . sorry, I know I shouldn’t judge, but the guy gives me the creeps. The other day he trapped me against my car and asked a bunch of personal questions . . .”

Maggie broke in. “Well why don’t you come stay with me? I’d love the company, and we could share a ride to work.”

“Oh, would it be all right? I hate to . . .”

“*All right?* It would be a treat. We could stay up and talk—maybe even start on a couple of baby quilts.” Stephanie did her best to keep from crying. Maggie always knew what to say. “Now you just tell Mitch you’re coming to my house while he’s gone and that’s all there is to it. When does he leave?”

“An hour and a half.”

“My goodness, you better start packing. Will you be taking him to the airport?”

“If he’ll let me. He’s been acting funny the whole day.”

“Well, you just insist. Men like those warm-fuzzy goodbyes, even if they won’t admit it. I’ll be expecting you around seven. *We’re going to have fun!*”

“Thank you so much.” Stephanie wiped away a tear with the back of her hand.

“Nope. As you can see, no one here’s been murdered.” Vinnie, together with several police officers, stood in the middle of a spotless paint booth. “The only chemical we have that’s even close to acid is a barrel of cleaner we use to clean the paint gun equipment. You’re welcome to look around, but like I told you, I just came down to show the place to a client. Wasn’t feeling so good, poor kid, and puked on the floor. I ran the booth through a quick wash cycle to get rid of the smell and keep it from drying.”

One of the officers spoke up. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Domenico, I’d like to look at *that* barrel.”

“Right this way.”

Vinnie led him to a drum that sat in the corner of the dusty shop next to a red machine with *Gun Mate* painted in big bold letters across the front.

Underneath, in smaller print, it read: *Self-contained spray equipment cleaning system. Cleans, flushes and recycles fluid automatically. EPA approved.* The officer began prying the top off the drum with his gloved fingers.

Another officer knelt near the back bay door to examine a set of car tracks in the fine dust. Yet another, a younger cop, answered a call on his radio.

"That's it," Vinnie said, rubbing his hands together in a gesture of finality. "Now if you don't mind, I got a busy day ahead."

"Did someone pull a car in and out of here recently?" the cop near the door asked.

Vinnie shrugged. "Could be. I store collectible cars here occasionally."

The officer pressed the matter. "What kind of car would it've been? By the width of the tracks and the size of the tires, I'd guess it was either a mid-size or compact car."

Vinnie, clearly perturbed by the questioning, took a moment to consider his answer. "Probably a Mustang," he replied. "My people bring 'em down for a wash and dry."

"Looks to me it might've been a bit heavier when it left than when it pulled in." The officer studied Vinnie's face. "See, the tracks had less tread touching the floor coming in than it did pulling out."

Vinnie let out a snort. "Who d'ya' think you are, Sherlock Holmes? Maybe it was *movin'* faster. Or maybe it was a small truck and the bed got filled with *water* when they washed it. Maybe, maybe, maybe . . . it don't mean nothin'. Ya' know, I ain't got time for this. Now why don't ya' just gimme back my gun and get outta here. I was nice enough to let ya' in, and all ya' done is make accusations."

The officer who'd been on the phone snapped the clip from Vinnie's .45 and checked the chamber. "Permit's valid, but the boys downtown want you to come in and have a chat with them about the one you claimed was stolen."

"Yeah, I heard they found it when they pulled Eddie from the wall. I already told you, he took it from me after he assaulted me." Vinnie thrust his chin in the air and pointed at the ugly bruise. "See where he popped me? Old man musta' hit me with a brick 'r somethin'."

The officer who had opened the barrel of solvent walked over. "Couldn't have been his fist? . . . Because if it was, that means you had your clock

cleaned by a skinny old geezer.” All three officers laughed.

“Get out!” He waited until the last of the cops was out the door, then broke into a robust laugh. “Bye, bye, boys,” he jeered, fluttering his fingers and inching the door closed.

The officers lingered in front of the building, chatting in a tight blue triangle. “The guy’s good—got to hand it to him. He came back with an answer for every question.”

“Could you tell the car was heavier just by the tracks?” asked the younger cop.

“Nah, I was pullin’ his leg. But the bozo didn’t once call my bluff to argue that the car was the same when it went in as it was when it went out. He’s as dirty as they come. These gangsters . . . they’re all the same. Cruise in here from back east thinkin’ they can just step in and open up for business. It won’t be long before the big boys get tired of him and squash him like a bug.”

“This is the second tip we’ve received that this guy pulled off a murder. I just wish we could get our hands on one of the callers.”

“Not a chance. They see someone’s brains splattered on the ground and the guy that did it’s never been nailed for more than a traffic ticket. You think they’ll come forward and just give it all up? Yeah, right. Everyone of ‘em’s probably got a sheet a mile long.”

The officers headed for their vehicles. “So you don’t think Mr. Domenico’d let a forensics team come check out the place?” one of them bristled sarcastically.

“Over his dead body.”

Vinnie waited until the last car had pulled away before jerking open the front door and strutting out into the sunlight. He didn’t mind being the brunt of their jokes; let ‘em get their jollies, while he flaunted his masterful ability to get away with murder—literally. After opening the trunk and removing the garment bag, he returned to the shop and opened the cover to the Gun Mate. Taking the clothing from the bag, he dumped the load—bag and all—in the tray of the cleaning apparatus, closed the lid, and pressed the auto mode button. A casual dusting off of the hands was followed by a cigarette pressed to his lips.

At the same time, Mitch, finally at the end of his panicked race home, screeched to a stop in the driveway. Twice he’d tried to call Stephanie to confirm that everything was still okay. Each time he’d gotten a busy signal. He pushed the key into the lock and barged through the front

door. "Stef!"

"In the bedroom." Her voice was cheerful and pleasant.

Mitch calmed his nerves—to a mild hysteria, at best—and hurried down the hall, trying to best decide how to begin his eventful saga. Stephanie was organizing her new clothes in a suitcase lying on the bed. "What're you doing?" he asked, his face rife with confusion.

"I know why you've decided not to go, and I've solved the problem."

"What?"

"You've been acting strange the last few days and I want you to know it hasn't gone unnoticed. I'm sorry I wasn't more sensitive."

"No, *I'm* sorry. None of this is your fault . . ."

"Mitch—please—let me finish," she insisted. "You always apologize first and now it's my turn." She looked him in the eye. "I've decided I haven't been very fair with you about church. I won't ask you anymore about going. When you're ready, I'll be waiting."

Mitch looked up. *If she only knew*. "Stef, it's not that—"

"Wait, I'm not finished. I was probably responsible for your file being messed up, too. It's been so long I can't remember, and you know how I am about cramming things into tight spaces. Just look at my closet." She stepped nearer and smiled.

"You don't . . ." Mitch started before being cut short again by the tip of Stephanie's index finger against his lips.

"Shh, this is hard enough already. You *have* to go to the finals. I've made arrangements to stay with Maggie while you're gone, so you won't have to worry about me. I know you've been worried about Al, but he won't even know where I am. You know I'll miss you, but Maggie and I will have lots of fun together. Besides, it's safer to fly in an airplane than it is to drive a car."

Mitch could no longer meet her enthusiastic gaze. He realized how hard it must have been for her to apologize. She'd just bared her soul to him, and he was about to let his deception continue. *She'd be safe with Maggie*, he reasoned. *Then he could pretend to leave town and figure out what to do about Vinnie.*

Seeing her husband's hesitation, her smile widened. "I've flown lots of times, and I'm still here." She reached out and raised his chin with her fingers. "Everything will be fine—I promise." She kissed him softly on the lips.

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Now I don’t mean to be rude, but you smell deadly.” She winced and feigned holding her nose. “You hop in the shower. I’ll finish packing my things and start on yours.”

Deadly, Mitch thought. Vinnie’s the one who’s deadly.

Vinnie crushed the life out of a second smoldering butt with the sole of his patent-leather shoe and approached the Gun Mate. The auto mode light had just quit flashing and the machine had spun to a stop. The spray-gun cleaner was the top of the line, promising “four chambers of spotless equipment with every cycle. No residue build up or corrosive deterioration to metal parts”—and it had fulfilled every promise.

Vinnie jimmied the residue basket from the drain and shook the pile of debris into a plastic bag. A smirk crossed his lips as he reflected on the surprise awaiting Mitch—or, better yet, his sweet wife—in the Escort. The same Escort that sat in the sweltering sun on Mitch’s driveway, slightly heavier at the back; the same Escort that had struck bottom when it sped onto Bridger from Three Queens; the same Escort that had a growing puddle of blood dripping from its trunk onto the scorching driveway. The kid would be back, no doubt, and details would need to be taken care of.

TWENTY-THREE

DRESSED IN PINK PANTS, a flowered, loose-fitting top with a stethoscope jammed in the pocket, white tennis shoes, and her dark hair pulled back and tied up, the R.N. stepped to the bed adjacent to Eddie's and drew a blanket up over her patient. Nurse lay soundly asleep, curled up in a fetal position—elbows to chest, fists to chin, knees to arms—in the comfort of a dreamy escape from the erratic twists and turns of real life.

The nurse was followed by a short woman wearing old-fashioned orthopedic heels. Her ruddy, weathered face was covered in part by a dark '60s wig. A medium-green dress hit her mid-shin, and a white jacket, open at the front, its numerous pockets stuffed with notepads, erased any doubts about her medical background: she was a psychiatrist—a 'shrink,' through and through.

"Good afternoon," the woman in the jacket whispered in a soft Scandinavian accent. "I'm Doctor Wochik." Her lips formed a miniature 'o' as she spoke. She turned to the visitors in the room. "You must be Eddie's friends."

With Nurse asleep, Cap'n glanced from face to face of the little family, as if inquiring who was in charge. "Yes, ma'am," he finally blurted out.

The doctor addressed Cap'n, speaking softly. "Can you tell me how you found him?" Before Cap'n could take a breath, she stuck her hands deep in two of her pockets and rummaged around until one hand came out with a pen and the other with a lined, spiral notepad.

Cap'n, a tad suspicious, looked to Ritter, Sound and Smitty for approval, then began. The tiny woman seemed to be no threat and the police hadn't said a word about their breaking-and-entering fiasco. Still, he'd found it to be in his best interest to be leery of strangers. "Why d' *you* want to know?"

"My staff has expressed concern about your friend . . ." she took a

quick look at the note pad, “. . . Rebecca.”

Cap’n stole a glance at Margaret, who quietly sat near Eddie’s bed, then back at the doctor. “Name’s Nurse, and she took it real hard.”

The R.N. finished checking Eddie’s vitals before sliding a chair behind Dr. Wochik. She, in turn, took her time getting started, first tugging at her dress as she took her seat, then crossing her legs. Stretching her tiny feet, she rested them on tip-toes on the tile floor and slowly recorded some information on her notepad, her pen methodically retracing several of the words. At last she looked up and asked, “What do you mean by ‘took it hard’?”

“Like she weren’t there, but was, and talkin’ crazy ‘bout a baby.”

“Did she say who the baby was?”

“No, but Mrs. Thurston says it was Belle.”

Dr. Wochik jotted down more information before she looked up and repeated the name. “Belle?”

It wasn’t long before the Alley Team was fully engaged in telling all about Nurse, Belle, and the hard lives they’d lived on the street.

In the hard neighborhood partway across town, Stephanie zipped up her bulging overnight bag and placed it on the bed next to Mitch’s open duffle bag. He hadn’t said much since he’d been home. Now he stood across the room, preoccupied with tucking his golf shirt into his loose-fitting jeans.

“I’ll be alright, Mitch,” Stephanie said again as she watched him slip into a pair of loafers. “Is the flight still bugging you?”

Mitch absentmindedly ran his fingers through his thick, damp hair and pulled the collar of his shirt down. “I guess so,” he muttered. “I’ll be fine.”

“You can do anything you put your mind to, honey. That’s what I love about you.”

Mitch gave a half-hearted smile. He was thinking, not about a plane flight, but about the serious predicament he’d gotten them into. He’d go to prison for sure, if Vinnie turned the gun over to the cops. And if he went to prison, he’d break his wife’s heart. What he needed was a little leverage—maybe a lot of leverage—to turn the problem around. Maybe if he went to work for Vinnie he could get the information he needed. Perhaps Bino would help. Or maybe he could just do the smart thing and go to the cops and spill his guts. Maybe, maybe, maybe. . . .

But this is what he *would* do. He'd drop Stephanie off at Maggie's, drive back into town, stay at home, as needed, and work out a plan. It would mean telling another lie to his bride, but it was the only logical idea ricocheting around with the hundred other emotions cluttering up his brain.

"I put in your bag three pairs of pants, your work boots, three shirts, underwear, socks, and your ditty case with toothpaste, brush, razor and shaving cream." Stephanie bent to pick up her suitcase. "I'll put my bags in the car while you . . ."

Mitch reacted—"I'll get that."

"No, it's light. And I'm not *that* pregnant yet. Your flight leaves in less than an hour. We'd better get moving." She hustled out of the room and down the hall. In the kitchen, she swept her car keys from the countertop and frowned at the food on the stove. *I'll stop back later and clean up*, she thought.

The ugly thought of two thugs kidnapping Stephanie—or worse—gave him goose bumps. Hearing the front door open and shut, he snatched his bag from the bed and rushed out. He didn't want Stephanie left alone for even a minute.

Meanwhile, Stephanie's gaze had already strayed out past the driveway, over the dead and dying weeds between yards, under the shade of a giant Siberian elm, and come to rest on Al, sitting on the side steps in nothing but boxer shorts, beer in one hand, spray bottle in the other. The repugnant smell of filth carried in the hot breeze from his open kitchen door. It drifted around the lazy weightlifter, past the pile of empty beer cans, over the trash, to prick at Stephanie's nostrils. She quickly looked down to avoid eye contact and paused to wait for Mitch.

Al rested his elbows on his knees, grunting as he leaned forward, and pushed himself from the step. A broken swamp cooler had driven him outside, away from his standard fare of Sunday afternoon cable programming. The suitcase and cosmetic bag in Stephanie's hand presented too many questions to remain lounging about.

Mitch burst out the front door and surveyed the street and surrounding area for any serious threat. The almost laughable sight of Al, waddling across the driveway, spraying himself down with a fine mist that ran down the cleavage of his sagging chest, over his furry belly and down the front of his boxer shorts, made him look like he'd wet his pants. *Hardly* a threat.

“Mitch,” Stephanie said, relieved. “I was just about to come back in.” She rolled her eyes toward Al, who was treading tender-footed over the sticker weeds growing at the edge of his crumbling drive. “I’m so sick of his advances, I could scream.”

“Here, let me take that. Let’s go.” He drew the suitcase from Stephanie’s hand. Like his wife, he definitely was not in the mood for any of Al’s wisecracks. “Stay behind me and open the trunk,” he said through his teeth. “I’ll get rid of him.”

They stepped off the porch and down the sidewalk, past the red gravel planter, and set their things down by the trunk of the car.

From the side, Al raised his arm like a boy in a schoolroom. “I got question,” he called out. Then, tucking the spray bottle under his bushy armpit and picking one dirty hoof up off the ground, he hopped on the other, cursing a blue streak. Reaching down over his belly, he tried to pull a sticker from his calloused foot.

Mitch fiddled for his keys. “Go home, Al. You look like you pissed your pants.”

“Al Kostecki don’t piss pants,” he ranted. Stephanie discretely looked down his front in a half-smile and slid her own key into the trunk lock.

The rush of blood in Al’s head combined with the ten beers now flowing through his veins, added to the snapping of his thick neck upward, while still hopping on one foot, he was thrown off balance. He staggered to the left, then listed hard to the right to check his fall. His beer suds went airborne; the spray bottle did a 360 flip and landed on the concrete drive. At the same time, the trunk popped partway open and Mitch lifted the red bag to toss it inside. That’s when the sickening smell and repulsive sight hit him; that’s when he knew there was something else awaiting him inside the trunk besides a spare tire and a jack. Instinctively he dropped the bag and slammed the trunk shut. As he did, the drunken man’s flailing arm slapped the back of the car. The hard, swift blow broke Stephanie’s key off at the hilt. Al then crumpled hard on the drive.

Their brutish neighbor’s thick hand raised to the trunk lid. As he pulled himself up, his combustible temper unleashed itself in a non-stop string of vulgarities. Stephanie stood in shock and anger. Mitch, however, was too dumbstruck to defend her. All he could do was stand there, totally overwhelmed by the ghastly, nauseating, decomposing corpse he’d just witnessed.

This time Stephanie had had enough of Al's uncouth behavior. "You . . ." she stood shaking her key chain at Al, "you stupid, drunk pervert. You broke my key off in the lock and I'm covered in beer". Several droplets of dying foam ran down her face and neck onto the front of her shirt.

Al grunted and shook his head. "Al Kostecki not pervert. Voman, I show you one day real man." His thick thumb sank into his puffed-up chest.

Mitch gasped in relief. Neither Stephanie nor Al had caught sight or scent of Mike's mangled body curled up in the trunk, nor had they noticed the anger boiling inside him at Vinnie for putting it there. Rather, Mitch was caught up in a brooding, faraway daydream; the gulf between the real and the imaginary was widening by the second. Al's mouth was spewing trash at Stephanie; she in turn had come out swinging, delivering her own tongue lashing—one Al had had coming for months. "You're no *man*!" she mocked. "*Real* men don't get charged with sexual crimes and try to intimidate women. You're just a fat, demoralized, perverted, drunk!" All the while she remained behind Mitch's perceived shadow of protection.

Mitch, the pressure inside him mounting by the second, clenched his jaw, raised his taut fist, and brought it down like a hammer onto the trunk. The metal buckled from the blow. "Enough!" he screamed. ". . . Al—get out of here and sober up. Stef, get in the car and shut up."

The rivals, stunned by the act, immediately abandoned the fight. Stephanie skulked around the car and slipped inside. Her husband had never raised his voice at her before. She knew she probably deserved it. Al, on the other hand, stood his ground like a stubborn teenager, mumbling in Russian.

"Well?" Mitch said, eyeing the man, wondering if the confrontation would escalate or end in a stalemate.

"Al not pervert."

"Whatever you say, Al. Now go home and sober up."

"Ten beers noting. . . . Ten more—maybe."

Mitch knew Al would sell his own mother for a case of beer. He pulled from his pocket the cash he'd gotten from Bino and peeled off a twenty. "Fine. Go get ten more—get positively plastered—*then* sober up."

Al's slack-jawed gaze shifted from Mitch to the bill, then back to Mitch. After measuring his pride, he reached over and snatched the prize from his neighbor's fingers. "I go get drunk," his voice belched. "No feelings hard."

Mitch opened the car door, pitched the cases in the back seat, jumped in behind the wheel and backed from the driveway. They'd be late for his 'flight.'

By then Stephanie had done her best to calm her nerves. She looked down at her shaking hands. "I'm really sorry, Mitch. I don't know why I went off like that. It was stupid."

Mitch only could shake his head. "With any luck he'll buy another case of beer and forget it ever happened. Now listen to me: Don't go back to the house while I'm gone. Understand?"

Stephanie felt like her heart-felt apology had been completely brushed aside. "You're not my father," she shot back, folding her arms across her chest. "And I'm not your daughter."

"I didn't say you were. But if you do go back there while I'm away, it'll be the stupidest thing you ever did."

"That's what my father said about marrying you." Stephanie bowed her head. The hurtful words had arisen from her lips with no thought of how they'd sound.

"Maybe it was," Mitch replied. The car fell deathly silent. Mike's body wasn't the only thing growing cold in the heat of the day.

Dr. Wochik scanned her notes and checked her watch. "It's agreed, then. If Nurse is willing, you will encourage her to stay here at the hospital and let me see if I can help her work through her feelings. I've made arrangements for her to stay here with Eddie. I think they will each benefit from the other's company."

The old man stirred at the sound of his name and opened one eye. Sound drew near. "Hi, Eddie. How're you feeling?"

Eddie rolled his head side to side to see who all was in the room. His swollen right eye left him oblivious to Margaret's presence. "Like an amateur walloped by the heavyweight champ," he mumbled from his dry crusty lips.

Cap'n stood up. "Who done it, Eddie? Who shoved ya' down that rat hole?"

Eddie refused to talk about the incident, or acted as if he didn't have a clue what they were talking about.

Several miles later, Stephanie finally broke the icy silence in the car. "This isn't the way to the airport. . . ."

Mitch checked the mirrors for the twentieth time. "I'm not going to the airport."

"Then where are we going?"

"I'll drop you off at Maggie's first."

Stephanie bit her lip. "But I need my car."

"It's not running right and . . ."

"Mitch, you can't leave me without a car . . ."

"I have no choice."

"Yes, you do. Go to the airport and *I'll* take the car."

He checked the mirrors again. No one was following them—he was sure of it. "No! End of discussion."

"What is the matter with you!" Deep within, Stephanie was harboring thoughts of her father, who'd taken her car away when she'd insisted on marrying Mitch—who, she'd always argued, wasn't *anything like* her father.

Still buried in a state of crisis, Mitch gazed straight ahead. Maybe her father was right. Hooking up with him was the worst thing that ever happened to her. Pregnant, married to a convicted felon, broke, about to be evicted from their home . . . ; a liar, framed for the murder of his friend, and now hauling a dead body in the trunk of his wife's car. At last he said, "Stef, I'm sorry, but I can't explain right now." Again the inside of the car became quiet as a tomb.

Ten minutes later Mitch stopped in front of Maggie's. He climbed out and hauled Stephanie's suitcase and overnight bag from the back seat, carried them around the car and set them on the curb. "I have to go," he said, opening her door.

Stephanie crawled forlornly from the car, her face streaked with tears. *Something was wrong, terribly wrong. It couldn't be a simple case of flight-fright. So what was it?* "Mitch," she pleaded, "you can't go away while we feel this way. Please, tell me what's the matter." Maggie came out onto the front porch of her modest home. Sensing the friction between the young couple, she kept her distance. Mitch peered over at her, then back at his sweetheart—the love of his life, the love he was betraying. He felt like crying himself. "I'll call you."

Mitch turned and stepped around to the driver's-side door, took one last fleeting glance at his wife, and climbed in.

"Mitch, please!"

As he drove away, a flood of tears cascaded down his face. His gut

ached. His conflicting emotions spun totally out of control. *Stop and tell her you love her. . . . You're no good for her. . . . What about your babies? . . . She'll be safe there at Maggie's. . . .* Mitch—more on automatic pilot than anything—again checked his rear view mirror. No, there was no one trailing him. All he could see was Stephanie's slumped form, receding in the distance, Maggie, her arm placed gently around his wife's shoulder, offering comfort.

He wheeled the little car around the corner, skidded to a stop and pounded the steering wheel with both hands. *It's Vinnie's fault that I'm in trouble with the law, but I'm to blame for everything else!* Then a deafening yell rose from his heaving chest, the torrent of bottled-up frustration bubbling up from deep within, surfacing in a primitive scream.

TWENTY-FOUR

THE LOW RUMBLE OF HEATED VOICES roused Greg from his sleep. A dense, muggy haze hung inside the cramped enclosure. He reached up and wiped a smeared handful of sweat from between his chin and chest. Little balls of dead skin tugged at his stubbly face as he returned to wipe again with his frayed shirt sleeve. A prick at his leg brought his other hand down on his right calf. Leaning forward, he pulled the pant leg up his pink shin and brushed away the bloated body of a bed bug. In the grayness of the stifling room, he watched as the wounded insect battled to roll from its back to its feet on the bare mattress. All the while, his own brain and ears had finally coalesced to hear the conversation going on outside.

“You got nothin’ to worry ‘bout. Like I told you, they ain’t got evidence or they would’a drug me downtown. The old man lost his book—that’s it!”

“He called my old lady the day before he fell . . .”

“So what? Go see her; act like you missed her. Find out what she knows.”

Greg parted the carpet to see who spoke. The voices were coming from up above on the parking structure. Warily, he crept from the stale quarters and peered under the concrete guard rail that ran along its edge. Two men stood less than ten feet from the narrow opening. One was decked out in expensive Italian shoes and a silk suit, the other in jeans and sandals with no socks.

“Missed her?” Clint yowled sarcastically. “She can hardly stand the sight of me. ‘White trash’, is what my old man calls us. He’d rather die and leave his fortune to the Republican Party than me.”

“Then go tolerate her awhile and see why he called her. If the old man’s gonna spill his guts, we need to know.”

“Pops doesn’t trust the police. As far as I know he hasn’t called the cops in fifty years.”

“Then why we havin’ this conversation?” Vinnie turned to climb in his car.

“Because the old lady *will* call the cops—in a heartbeat.”

Vinnie paused to wring his hands. “Only one way to find out, ain’t there? I got an office full of lawyers that’ll squeeze the system if you have any trouble. We ain’t goin’ down on account a’ the old man, so stop your whinin’ and get your act together. We got work to do.” He slammed the door and peeled off up the ramp.

Greg crept back into the enclosure and scrounged through Nurse’s baskets, looking for a pen and paper. This was no boardroom and there weren’t any secretaries to keep minutes. After recording several pages of detailed notes, he leaned back to soak it all in. Horizontal rays of evening sun angled from down the alley and filtered through the small crack of the carpet doorway. Microscopic bits of glimmering dust and grit floated and danced in lazy circles in the bright shafts. They reminded him of the secure summer days he spent as a child; they reminded him of home, of the security of being in his own bedroom. Only a short time ago he was ready to end his miserable existence, but life now seemed worth fighting for. Just days before, hope had died, hope that he would ever again enjoy the basic comforts of living, of family, of friends. Now hope had been restored. He had learned that if you persevere, you can survive—and even thrive—in spite of the lack of fancy cars, country club memberships, big-dollar jobs or stock portfolios. Service, love, friendship, God, family . . . these were the critical elements to a happy life. He’d always taken them for granted, hadn’t cherished their rare beauty. Would he be given a second chance—a chance to set it right?

The sound of footsteps on the gravelly pavement outside caught Greg’s attention. The last golden rays peeking through the curtain were blocked by a man’s long shadow, which stretched down the alley and up the wall. Greg stuck his face next to the narrow opening and watched as the same young man he’d found crying in the alley jumped up effortlessly over the concrete guardrail into the parking structure and disappeared among the cars.

Frantically foraging through the piles of baskets for a pair of dirty socks, Greg pulled them on over his blisters. In stockinged feet, he skulked from his hiding place and scrambled up and over the wall, scanning between the cars that lined the mostly filled lot. At last he

came across Mitch, who was in the act of crawling under the draw arm leading to the employee-only parking area on the upper level.

On tiptoes, Greg darted across the concrete deck toward the draw arm, following the man, who by now had bolted around the corner and up the ramp. He glanced up at the security camera, positioned in a corner near a concrete beam. Protected by a heavy metal frame and thick glass, it panned the entire western half of the second level. The sound of squealing tires coming from behind him prompted Greg to slow to a walk. To the blare of rock music, a carload of inebriated men with wide-toothed grins and heads bobbing loosely from side to side, barreled past him toward the exit. Instinctively, Greg's posture took on that of a drunkard. He staggered, as if in a stupor, stumbled up against a concrete pillar and slid to a sitting position.

Nearby, a pot-bellied security guard marched double-time up the ramp at the far end. "... Ten-four. Does he look like a problem?" he barked out over his radio.

"No, he saw me," the radio squawked. "He's headed back your way."

"I'm on it. He won't get past." The heavy-set guard drew his weapon and pointed it up the facing incline, where he could hear Mitch's approaching footsteps.

As he rushed back down the ramp, Mitch gauged the situation. The guard on the upper level didn't pose much of a problem, but the one awaiting him at the gate arm, gun drawn, did.

"Hold on, kid," the guard growled. "Mister Domenico wants to see you."

Mitch slowed to a standstill. Raising his hands to his chest, he said, "What, you're going to shoot me for walking around?"

The second guard thundered down the ramp from behind, out of breath and red-face mad.

"No," he hissed, drawing his nightstick from its sheath, "but we might break your legs!" With that, he landed a fierce, solid blow to the back of Mitch's knee. "Mister Domenico don't *like* people snoopin' around, peekin' in car windows. And I don't like chasin' no-good punks like you!"

Mitch's leg buckled; he collapsed to the floor in agony. Greg, looking on from the presumed safety of his down-on-his-luck disguise, winced at the thought of the pain. He turned away.

The red-faced guard noticed the bum hunched against the column and bent to administer his meanspirited form of justice. "You wanna piece a' this too?" he sneered, shaking the stick at Greg. Greg moaned and rolled

to his hands and knees, intent on getting up and moving along. The cruel guard would have none of it. He raised his stick and delivered a vicious shot to Greg's backside. The second moan that erupted from Greg's lips was no act. The guard reared back and kicked Greg with his size-11 boot, snarling, "Get outta here—worthless piece a trash!"

The big-bellied guard broke up the fun. "Come on, Tom. The boss wants *this* guy upstairs. You can harass the drunks later."

The red-faced guard huffed and turned away. Then both guards bent down, jerked Mitch to his feet, and escorted him up the ramp leading to the Three Queens employee entrance.

Greg, the wind knocked out of him, fought to stand up. As he limped off down the ramp, he massaged at the growing knot in his buttocks, the soft and ample pounds he'd accumulated sitting down over the last several years. Usually slow to anger, an all-consuming desire for revenge had built up in his chest. More than likely, *Mister Domenico* was the kingpin of the credit card scam that had ruined his life. It was time someone did something about it. *But what, and how?*

While gingerly climbing over the guard rail back into the alley, Greg heard someone call, "Sunny, we were wonderin' where you went." It was Sound's voice. As he neared the concrete hut, Greg found, to his dismay, the entire Alley Team huddled together, with Nurse standing between Ritter and Cap'n, looking like her old self.

"At you, Sunny?" Nurse asked, rotating her head side to side, trying to adjust her half-blind eyes in the darkness.

"I'm here."

"See, I tol' you he didn't bail on us. An' he's th' only one 'at didn't turn on ol' Nurse like a double crossin' traitor." The old woman jabbed her wiry elbow into Cap'n's ribs. "These two-timin' bums was tryin' to get me an' Belle locked up in th' nuthouse. Be jiggered if we're goin' back there 'gain."

"Weren't nobody tryin' to lock you up, you old bag a' wind," Cap'n replied. "Just thought you might like to let the doctor help you, is all."

"Help me—cow pucky! 'At's what Charlie done tol' that Alabama judge pert-near fifty years ago." Nurse leaned over and mumbled through her hand, "Sorry, Belle, I promised I wouldn't talk bad 'bout yer daddy no more, but I gotta say it, get it off a' my conscience. Weren't my fault. Was yer lazy, hooch-drinkin' daddy—he's th' one didn't keep an eye on ya', no matter what he tol' ever'body else." She straight-

ened up and folded her arms defiantly across her sagging chest. "If'n I asked once I asked 'em a thousand times to fill that dry well with the extra rocks the neighbor dumped next ta' the hole. If'n he'd a' got his lazy butt up outta the hammock, he could' a had it filled before Belle was even born. But no . . . said he had plenty a' time before she learned to walk. Promised he'd put somethin' over it when she learned ta' crawl, and swore he'd watch her while I was out back scrubbin' th' dirty clothes."

Everyone listened intently as Nurse rambled on. "I checked on 'em once 'r twice, 'fore I started cookin' supper. Caught 'im sippin' his hooch once while Belle was playin' on the front porch real nice. Said he weren't sleepy 'tall . . ." Her voice trailed off, then she again spoke from the side of her mouth. "Course you can't remember, Belle. You was too young. Now let me finish without none a' yer interruptions."

Greg looked over at Ritter with a puzzled stare. The old Englishman arched his shoulders and nodded as Nurse went on with her narrative.

"Only been fifteen minutes since I checked on 'em 'til I called Charlie to eat. When he didn't answer, I went back out front. Lazy bum was dead drunk, empty bottle a' hooch broke on the ground." Nurse's forehead wrinkled and her lips puckered into an angry kiss. "Good thin' I found Belle 'fore she fell in 'at hole." The lips transformed into a toothless smile. "I'd a' missed her somethin' terrible."

"But you said . . ." Greg interrupted.

"Jus' a mistake. Been gettin' a bit forgetful in my ol' age. . . . 'Sides, how in tarnation could Belle be here if'n she fell in th' well?"

Greg nodded politely at Ritter. "Point well taken. Glad to have you back, Belle."

Nurse cringed. "Don't you start too, Sunny. Got 'nough crap in the chicken coop—we's already up to our knees. . . . You still wearin' a ring an all, you ought not be a flirtin' with a young single girl."

Greg reached down and fiddled with the ring on his finger. If he hadn't put on the extra pounds he'd have taken it off by now. He looked down into Nurse's face. She knew Belle was dead; she just didn't want to have to deal with the pain. "How's Eddie doing?" he finally asked.

"As ornery as ever and tight lipped as a door nail," said Cap'n. "Won't tell nobody what happened. Just said he fell down the chute."

The expression on Greg's face grew even more puzzled. "I've seen some strange things around here this afternoon. Some poor kid was just whacked

in the leg by one of Mister Vinnie's goons and drug off to see the *man*, at gunpoint. He's probably up in Vinnie's penthouse right now. Not a good place to be. I kind of feel like I know the young guy. My brain keeps telling me he's a saint. Earlier today I found him in the alley crying behind the garbage can. But when I asked him what was wrong, he jumped up and ran off."

Mitch stepped off the elevator on the 13th floor, wishing *he'd* run away the first time he'd ever met Vincent Domenico. "Didn't figure you'd get on the plane, kid. Tell me, did your wife meet Mike, or was the pleasure all yours?" Mitch just stood there, tongue-tied, his jaw clenched, glaring at Vinnie. "Was it when you put your suitcase in the car?" He laughed and tossed something at Mitch, an object he'd kept tucked under his jacket. Mike's Federal I.D. badge hit Mitch in the chest and bounced open on the floor. "Just like I figured, a cop, Federal type. 'Course, maybe you already knew that. Had that badge stuck under his pant leg." Vinnie's leer turned hard and angry. "Had this strapped to the other leg." He stuck his gloved hand under his lapel and brought out a second item.

This time Mitch managed to block Vinnie's underhand fast-pitch throw. The heavy, metallic object bounced off his arm and clunked to the floor near the badge. Mitch's stunned gaze settled on the black hand gun at his feet.

"You was gonna set me up," grumbled Vinnie. "You're about as predictable as they come. And here I thought you'd wise up and figure out the system ain't fair. You gotta make your own luck—it don't come to you. You either go with the flow or get run over. But you're too stupid to figure that out. You just stand there in the middle a' the road."

Mitch again stared down at the small automatic.

"Wonderin' if it's loaded? But you ain't the gamblin' type, now, are you? Don't drink, probably don't smoke, bet you never been with a whore. . . ."

Mitch's nostrils flared like an angry bull's.

"I know what you are. One a' them preacher boys ridin' 'round town on your bike," Vinnie taunted. "What if I told you the gun was loaded and all you got to do is pick it up and pull the trigger?"

Mitch finally found his voice. "I don't believe anything that comes from your lying mouth."

Vinnie leaned back in his chair and propped his hands behind his head.

“You’re gonna hurt my feelings, kid. We gotta learn to trust each other if we’re gonna work together.”

“Won’t happen.”

“Then it looks like I’m gonna hafta kill you. Go on, take a gamble. I give you my word—it’s loaded. Pick up the piece and give it your best shot. . . . I’ll count to five. One . . . two . . .”

Mitch, sensing the guy wasn’t kidding, reached down and picked up the gun. Lifting it, he took aim at Vinnie’s glowering mug.

“. . . three . . . four—you better do it before I scatter your brains all over my elevator doors—or ain’t you got what it takes?”

A thousand pictures flashed through Mitch’s mind. The one most vivid was of Stephanie standing out on the sidewalk in front of Maggie’s, crying as he pulled away. His heart was racing, his breathing deep as he gripped the gun.

Vinnie brought his own gun from his jacket and steadily hiked it to eye level. “Five.” Mitch squeezed the trigger; the gun clicked. The tough guy, obviously impressed, pulled himself to his feet and walked over to where Mitch stood. “See, you do got what it takes,” he gloated, reaching out to pry the weapon from Mitch’s frozen fingers before tucking his own back inside his belt. “And all this time I thought you lacked stomach.” A quick flick of the wrist snapped a loaded clip from the small hand gun. The cartridge bounced off the white carpeted floor and rolled up against the floorboard. “Like I said, the *gun* was loaded—just not the chamber.” He shoved it in Mitch’s front pocket and returned to his desk.

All at once Mitch’s simmering temper reached the boiling point. “And you’re nothing but a lying, cheating coward who always plays with a stacked deck,” he screamed. His eyes glazed over. He’d just been willing to kill the wise guy, so great was the disgust and hatred he felt towards him.

“Feels good, don’t it. . . . Blood pumpin’ through your veins, adrenalin rushin’ to your head. Makes everything hard, intense. Go ahead, pick up the clip and pop it in. It’s easier the second time around, and just as big a rush. That is, unless *my* bullet nails you first. Then it’s no rush at all. It’s just . . . *dead*.”

Greg had just finished explaining what he’d seen, how the two guards had dragged the young man off to Vinnie’s penthouse and about the whack

he himself had taken across the backside. A broad smile spread across Sound's lean face, "If you think you're hurt that bad," he said, "you ought to drop them pants and let Nurse take a look."

Everyone laughed—all except Nurse. "What else?" she insisted. "This ain't no time fer funny business. I seen an' heard more livin' in this alley—bad eyes an' all—'an I care t' talk about. 'At boy might be in a heap a' trouble, and we's likely the only ones can help." Faces slackened and all eyes turned back to Greg.

"Vinnie was wearing a pair of disposable coveralls. He pulled a small white car out of the garage down the alley, just after the young guy ran off. Then some young dude—I guess he was a valet, or something—came and drove the car away."

"Was it an Escort?" Ritter piped in.

Greg shook his head. "I'm a computer nerd, not a car salesman."

Ritter closed his eyes, remembering. "I noticed a white Escort parked by the vacant lot on Third when Mrs. Thurston's cab dropped us off. Think it might be the car?"

Sound raised a finger and shook it in Ritter's face. "Just because you're a mechanic and know your cars, it doesn't mean the rest of us do." Smitty scratched methodically at his scraggly beard and nodded in agreement.

"Nobody asked your bloody opinion," Ritter shot back as he turned between Sound and Smitty.

"Enough," Nurse snapped, disrupting the quarrel. "Don't matter. You two report to Cap'n, then go check out the car. Take Smitty. If'n it's locked, he can open it up so you can see whose it is."

"You heard the orders, go check out the car," Cap'n repeated. Smitty turned and—mime that he was—leaned forward as if in full stride, waiting for someone to take up the lead. Ritter pivoted sharply on his short legs and stepped in front, striding out on upcurled toes to keep from aggravating his bunions. Sound leaned over to address Nurse, raising a finger as if to protest the assignment. But before he could get out a single syllable, Cap'n roared, "Move, private!"

Overmatched, and defeated before he'd begun, Sound abandoned the objections, smacked his lips together, and followed the other two vagrants up the alley towards Bridger Avenue.

Pistol clip in hand, Mitch stroked the first bullet with his thumb. Vinnie

had removed his own gun from his jacket and held it up with its clip. "Your move, kid. Kinda excitin', ain't it. Just like an old TV-western showdown."

Mitch's chest heaved. Every muscle in his body was knotted. He knew how to shoot—picked off many a junkyard rat with his grandpa's 9mm. He hefted the weapon and imagined blowing away the big, two-bit rat sitting before him. His mind reeled as he pondered what he was up against. *The guy's a piece of trash, no better than a filthy rat. . . . But Stef and the twins. What would they do? Vinnie's a cold-blooded killer. I'm over-matched. . . .* Deciding he had to call Vinnie out and meet him on more equitable terms, he muttered under his breath, "You're still playing with a stacked deck."

"What? You got a gun, I got a gun. Sounds even to me. You 'fraid I'm faster?"

"Maybe, maybe not. But you've got nothing to lose but your miserable life. I've got everything to live for—that is, I *had*, until you came along."

"Hmm," Vinnie sighed, crossing his legs at the ankle. "You want your puny life back?"

"That'd be a good start."

"Look around you. I started with nothin', just like you, kid, and now look what I got. I'm offerin' you a piece of it." Vinnie waved his arms in a flourish. "All you got to do is come to work for me."

"Why me?"

"Don't know. Been tryin' to figure it out for myself. Ain't never had nobody tell me no but my old man." He swallowed hard.

"You miss him."

Several fowl oaths tumbled from Vinnie's lips as he stood, snapped the clip in his gun and shoved it back in the holster. "The old man was nothin'. Just a shooter for his brother. Had no self respect. . . . Now about that wager." Vinnie spun on the balls of his leather shoes and strode over to the wet-bar.

Mitch looked down at the clip in his hand, while his other hand inched toward the gun in his pocket. *Vinnie had a soft spot after all. His whole life was centered around proving himself to his dead old man.* "My dad's dead, too," Mitch murmured as he eased the gun from his pocket. "Shot himself in the head when I was seven. I miss him and hate him, both at the same time. Miss him for not being there for me; hate him for what he did." Mitch slid the clip partway into the grip.

Almost in a single motion, Vinnie swung the refrigerator door open, spun around to face Mitch, yanked his pistol from its holster and bolted a round into the chamber. The barrel was pointed straight at Mitch's head. "*Don't miss him!*" the hood snarled. "Like I told you—my dad, yours, they was patsies. . . . Now you wanna die or gamble?" Mitch eased the clip from the grip and slid the gun in one pocket, the clip in the other. "I would'a been disappointed if you hadn't tried, kid. But if you ever try again, I'll kill you on the spot."

Greg watched the vagrants turn at the end of the alley and head toward Third. "They gone?" Nurse asked him. "Can't stand 'nother minute a' their squabblin'. We got some serious things t' consider. . . ." She leaned in close to Greg and Cap'n. "I ain't never told nobody what I'm 'bout t' tell you two. Ya' both gotta swear ya' won't tell no one, long as I'm alive."

"What is it, Nurse?"

"Swear."

"I swear."

"You too, Cap'n."

"You know me better'n that . . ." Cap'n began.

"You gotta swear."

"Fine. I swear."

Nurse faltered, cleared her throat, then spoke. "Few months back, I heard some ugly shoutin' at the body shop. Was real late and woke me outta a dead sleep. I snuck down by the door and could hear Mister Vinnie yellin' at Jimmy."

"Who's Jimmy?" Greg asked.

"The lowdown slime ball used to run the shop for Mister Vinnie. Always had his drugusin' friends down here late at night, smokin' their glass, keepin' me awake."

"Glass?"

Cap'n piped in. "Street name for meth."

"Methamphetamine?"

"Course," snorted the big man. "Where you been hangin' out, Sunny, at the beach?"

"Sorry. I've lived kind of a sheltered life."

"No mind," Nurse continued in her hushed tone. "Like I's sayin', Mister Vinnie was askin' Jimmy what he'd been tellin' others, 'specially his new

boss Mike. Jimmy kep' sayin' 'Nothin', Vinnie, I swear I ain't told nobody nothin' . . . I swear.' Well, after that, their voices went kinda' smothered, like they was in a closet. I started back for bed, 'cause I couldn't hear what they was sayin' no more. Then I heard a pop. I'm sure it was a gun."

Greg's eyes went wide. "He *killed* him?"

"Didn't see it with my own eyes, but the yellin' stopped. I was shakin', see. And then a couple 'a minutes later, some machines started inside. Two weeks later the cops were askin' lots a' questions 'round here. Rumor has it, everybody knows it were Vinnie who done it. A warnin', a' sorts, not to cross 'im."

TWENTY-FIVE

THE ALLEY TEAM didn't even ask each other if they were willing to help the kid, it was a given. Greg thought he knew him from somewhere, and he was in some kind of trouble—'Vinnie' kind of trouble. That was enough for them. The hood had taken too much control of the neighborhood and, they were certain, he was up to no good. Eddie had taken a fall and almost died and Jimmy had been murdered—mind you, not that anyone felt any great loss over his passing. . . .

Vinnie slouched in his desk chair and offered Mitch a seat. He was holding the title to Mitch's "goat," along with the gun that had killed Mike, still in a plastic bag. "You sure you don't wanna sit?"

"Positive." Mitch consciously slowed his breathing, his arms folded across his chest.

"Suit yourself," Vinnie sniffed. "Okay, here's the bet: I hide the gun in my cah, give you the title to your cah as good faith." Vinnie waved the title like a trophy. "You knew I had it, didn't you?" Mitch nodded. "Then you got forty-eight hours to steal my cah and get the gun. If you do it without laying so much as a scratch on my precious Ferrari, we trade cahs. You bring mine to me, I give you the goat back—in pristine condition, mind you—and you walk away, no questions asked."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And if I don't get away?"

"You come to work for me. You can keep the cah and I'll pay you like you never been paid before. The gun'll be insurance, so you don't renege on the bet." Vinnie reached out with the title.

"How do you know *I'm* not a cop?"

Vinnie burst out laughing. "Kid you got your butt hangin' out all over. That pretty little wife a' yours has 'vulnerability' written all over you. And cops don't drive Pontiac GTOs with plates from a Chrysler."

His face went grim. "And if you was a cop, I'd either be dead or locked in the slammer—like you'll be if the Feds figure out who killed Mike."

"What about Mike?" Mitch still stood with his arms folded.

Vinnie dropped the title on the floor at Mitch's feet. "Good ol' Mike, curled up sound asleep in the back a' your woman's car." Vinnie turned, stretched his arms, and began to pace. "The cah's a total loss. Hafta burn it. I'll take care of Mike after you move the body into his sedan. It's still parked outside the body shop. The keys are in his pocket." Vinnie opened a file cabinet drawer and took out a pair of disposable coveralls. "You might want to put these on." He tossed the bundle on the floor near Mike's badge. "Leave 'em in the trunk with Mike, along with the gun and badge. Make sure you wipe your prints clean."

Mitch shook his head. "The way I see it, you're still playing with the deck stacked in your favor."

"How's that?"

"You're betting *my* life and *my* car. If you lose, you lose nothing. If I win, I'm still out a car and my credit cards you've been messing with. Up the anti—put something of yours on the line, then hand me the keys to your car. . . ."

Vinnie paced again. "I see your point. Maybe I'll make a bettin' man outta you yet." He stalked back to the fridge and pulled open the door. After pulling a banded pile of cash from one of its trays, he returned and dropped the stack on the coveralls. "Twenty grand. You win, it's yours, paid up front. My boys catch you first, you lose, it's three months' wages." Vinnie reached into his suitcoat pocket, pulled out the keys to his car, and held them out in his open palm. "This oughta be fun, kid. Real fun." He dropped the keys on the pile.

Sound was first to run down the alley, with Smitty close behind. Ritter was nowhere in sight. "There's a body in the trunk!" he announced, out of breath. "Poor guy's brains are leaking out."

Greg shuddered, already freaked out by Nurse's story.

"Shut your traps! You want th' whole stinkin' block to know?" Nurse chided. "'Sides, ain't the first time you seen a dead body." She craned her neck to peer back out to the street. "Where's Ritter?"

"He's coming." Sound gave a wave of his hand, then lowered his voice. "Sure, but this one's been murdered. Yeah, I've seen bodies before, but those were guys having accidents or just being on the street

too long . . .”

“Ain’t true,” countered Nurse. “Skip was thrown front a’ a train. Cops didn’t care, ‘cause he’s one a’ us.” Sound nodded in agreement. “Sunny, you gotta take a look a’ that car and see if’n it’s same one Vinnie was pullin’ out.”

Everyone turned to see Ritter coming up the alleyway, waddling heel-first. Greg turned back to Nurse. “I’ll try, but I don’t think I’ll be much help.”

Badly out of breath, Ritter shuffled up to the group. “Mitchell and—Stephanie Wilson,” he gasped. Then, turning to address his fellow street rats, he whined, “Why in blasted darkness ‘d you run off so fast?”

“Didn’t you hear us?” replied Sound. “We found a body in the trunk. The key was broken in the lock, so Smitty just popped the trunk open with a screwdriver.”

“Some bloody friends you are—leaving me sittin’ in the cab while you’re racing down the street.” Ritter doubled up his fist and made a beeline for Sound. Smitty, diving for cover, slithered behind Cap’n, who in turn seized Ritter by the collar.

Holding up her arms, Nurse quelled the near-riot. “Hold it! We ain’t gonna have no cat fight!”

Cap’n brought Ritter’s face near his own. “You hear? ‘At’s an order.” Giving him one last warning scowl, he shoved Ritter away like a pesky fly.

“Bloomin’ cowards,” Ritter mumbled, his eye twitching in pain as he straightened his shirt.

Finally Nurse steered the group back to the matter at hand. “Who in th’ love a’ Pete is Mitchell an’ Stephanie Wilson?” she demanded.

“Registered owners of the car, for queen’s sake,” Ritter trumpeted. Still messing with his shirt, he mewled, “You big ox, you broke me button!”

Cap’n raised his big paw in a threatening gesture, sending Ritter scampering away. Nurse raised a crooked finger and shook it at them both. “I ain’t warnin’ ya’ ‘gain. One more word a’ trash an’ I’m sendin’ ya’ both home. We got work t’ do.” The old woman dropped her hand—and her voice. “Names ring a bell?” she asked Greg. He shook his head. The little family then ducked behind the power box in front of Nurse’s shack and began to form a plan.

"We on?" Vinnie asked.

Mitch stood thinking over the proposition. At last he unfolded his arms. "One change."

"What's that?"

"I'll take care of Mike's body and the car. Someone once told me I need to see to the details—personally."

"See, you learned somethin' already."

"Yeah, I'm learning *real* fast." Mitch looked down at the pile at his feet.

"Take it, kid, all bets final." Mitch crouched over and gathered up the assorted items: Mike's badge, \$20,000 in cash, the keys to Vinnie's car, the title to his GTO, and the pair of disposable coveralls. As he went to stand up, Vinnie grabbed him by the hair and again shoved the barrel of his gun in Mitch's cheek. "Remember—you screw with me, kid, and I'll do your pretty lady while you watch, then show you—up close and personal—what a piece like this'll do to your head. Got that?"

Mitch held his head erect and looked Vinnie straight in the eye, jaw clenched. "I got it."

"And you try and skip out on me, the gun goes downtown with your name on it. Can't run far enough to get away from the Feds, neither. I got a few friends who tried. If the Feds don't get you, I will." Vinnie shoved Mitch away. "Forty-eight hours," he snapped, then pushed the call button by the elevator. "My boys catch you before you get the car, the bets over and I win. Good luck getting outta the hotel."

Mitch stepped into the elevator. A slender hint of a smile creased his lips as he remembered the camera in the corner. Turning to face his foe, he said, "Catch me? Won't happen." The elevator door closed.

Vinnie immediately sat down at his desk and flipped on the digital computer screen, scrolling through the frames of live surveillance video until he got to the elevator. There was his patsy, his back to the lens. The kid pushed the *stop* button, then fumbled nervously with the items he held clamped under his arm. Then the kid did something totally unexpected: he turned to face the camera and said, "You're still playing with a stacked deck, Mr. Domenico. Go fish. . . ." Then he raised Mike's gun and aimed it at the camera. When he squeezed the trigger, Vinnie recoiled and slouched to the side, as if dodging a real bullet, before the screen went blank. The sound of gunfire echoed up the elevator shaft. Vinnie grabbed the phone and punched a button.

"The kid's on the eleventh floor. He's got a gun. The guy that nabs

him—alive—gets the twenty grand he’s packin.” The downstairs security office became a tank of sharks caught up in a feeding frenzy. Uniformed guards scurried about, seeking out positions near the elevator and the hotel’s exits. “And park three men at my car,” added Vinnie. “I don’t want him gettin’ near it.”

Inside elevator #1, Mitch punched the buttons to every floor, tucked the cash, coveralls and title inside his shirt and the gun and badge in his pocket. Before hitting the *start* button, he contemplated how he would proceed. *Getting out of the building will be the hard part. But if I make it out in one piece, Vinnie’s made one big mistake: without a body, the gun’s useless.* Mitch calculated the risks involved. *Vinnie’s just playing games again. There’s no way he’s going to let me out on the street with a gun, the keys to his car and twenty-thousand dollars. It’s got to be another setup.*

Meanwhile, Vinnie scrolled down on his video surveillance equipment and switched the camera view to the 11th-floor hallway, where he watched the elevator doors shut. The camera was located around the corner, so Mitch was out of view. He couldn’t be sure whether the kid was still inside. Vinnie cursed, “Override the elevator.”

The guard from the main security room called back, “We can’t, sir. The system’s too old.”

“Then get a man on every floor and every entrance and kill the power to my elevator. Don’t let the kid outta the building. He stole the keys to my car.” Two guards rushed down the hall toward the mechanical room. The slow-moving elevator lurched to a halt on the 10th floor. Vinnie switched screens again, to a large group of senior citizens chatting in the hallway while waiting for a lift. The doors opened and the energetic seniors scurried inside—into an empty car.

Up above, Mitch eased his foot through the jimmied trap door in the elevator’s ceiling and quietly coaxed it shut. The muted voices of the old folks below rattled on about the all-you-can-eat seafood buffet . . . too many calories . . . how much they’d won and lost in the nickel slots . . . the lousy beds in room 1015.

Still farther below, the #2 and #3 elevators settled to the lobby floor, opening to several waiting guards. Suddenly the #1 car jolted to a stop. A collective gasp issued from its older passengers, followed by a sing-song of self-reassurances that everything would be alright. Mitch’s eyes had gradually adjusted to the darkness of the elevator shaft, which,

he saw, shared a connecting shaft with two other cars in a common concrete compartment. Greasy, metal guide tracks were bolted to the back walls by means of angle-iron straps, spaced in three- to four-foot intervals up and down the shaft.

The two rising elevators advanced intermittently, their bells ringing at each floor. One elevator stopped just one floor below. Mitch listened in on the guards' hot-blooded argument as to who should stay on the 8th floor and who would go on up to the 9th. The second of the two elevators ground to a halt about a foot short of the powerless car where Mitch waited. He stepped over to its roof as the doors opened and the pack of frantic guards rushed out.

"Power #1 back up," he heard a guard call over the radio. The #2 car's doors shut and the lift began its ascent. Mitch didn't hear the reactions of the startled elderly guests when their elevator doors opened onto a line of armed guards. Their sighs of relief and astonished gasps were drowned out by the spinning pulleys and moving cables attached to the second elevator—a car that, Mitch realized, was moving in the wrong direction! He stooped to listen as the two remaining guards waited for the door to open.

"He's not on the elevator," the radio squealed, over the mingled voices of alarmed senior citizens.

"Block the door with an ashtray," one of the men ordered. "Then search the floor. I'll check the stairs."

Mitch took hold of the latch on the trap door and opened it a crack. The car was empty. *Not a good move to start out above the other elevators*, he thought as he released the latch and studied the jumble of suspended cables and electrical wires overhead. He gave a tug at the power cable attached to the top of the shaft. It seemed to hang from a retractable pulley that reeled it in and out as the car went up and down. The cable slackened as he stretched it around the metal guide wheels at the back of the car. With any luck, at first movement the elevator would be disabled.

Drawing the disposable coveralls from his shirt, he wrapped them around his hands and reached for the cables of the #3 car, which sat motionless just two floors below. Cautiously, he began sliding down the cable, his feet swinging precariously in the air. Hoping and praying the elevator didn't move and send the cables on their pulleys reeling in opposite directions, his feet finally came to rest atop the third

car. Quietly standing chest-high to the doors of the 10th floor, he fingered their release latches. They didn't seem to work like he'd seen in the movies. It appeared the doors were designed to open only when two spring-loaded safety latches on opposite sides were tripped. And they could only be tripped when the elevator was parked in the proper position. That would pose a problem. Getting out of the shaft without an elevator seemed the best option; disabling the other two cars seemed like time well spent.

The power cable on the third car was also wound on a retractable pulley. Mitch drew out enough slack to wind it around the guide wheels at the back. Then, dangling perilously by the angle-iron braces, he crossed back over to where the first car had reappeared.

"Come on, let's give 'em a hand on the eleventh." The voice came from one of the elevators down near the 9th floor, but the echoing sound in the shaft made it almost impossible to distinguish which one. Centering himself on the first car, he tugged at the power cable overhead. Guards entering below shook the car. Mitch made a quick wrap with the cable just as the elevator doors shut. Hurrying to make a frantic second loop around the wheel, he released the cord. As the elevator started up along its track, the floundering cord became entangled in the wheel and stretched beyond its limits, sending a shower of sparks cascading from its jagged ends. The car bounced, then recoiled to a brakeless stop.

The stunned guards inside the car started to cuss and bang on the elevator doors. Unhooking their flashlights from their belts, they peered dumbly up at the innocuous ceiling tiles above them, speculating about how their 'man'—possibly still hiding in the elevator shaft—had brought the car to a standstill. Mitch yanked the frayed power cable from the greasy gears and again drew some slack from the reel, several stories above. This new cord he wedged between an angle-iron brace and its neighboring track, and dropped the hot end on the car's trap door. Without further delay he clasped tightly to a second brace and started climbing down the wall of the shaft, his long legs and arms navigating from one brace to the next.

The blood-curdling yell of the guard who'd been lifted up by the others to check out the trap door rebounded up and down the 13-story chasm. Mitch cringed, hoping the man wasn't seriously injured. Muffled radio chatter and angry voices echoed and collided with the man's screams. Mitch subconsciously counted floors as he hurled him-

self downward along the back of the wall. They'd have the power off soon, and then they'd come after him. He didn't have much time.

Meanwhile, Smitty had been busy picking two locks—one to Carson Auto Body's alley-side door, the other to Stephanie's ignition—while Sound disconnected the phone service and power to the body shop to shut off the alarm and disabled the keypad. Nurse had been adamant about not repeating the same three-ring circus they'd suffered through before at Eddie's place.

"It look like the same car?" Nurse asked Greg as the little Escort pulled in the alley.

Greg shook his head. "I'm not much help in the dark. Even in the light, all little white cars look the same to me."

She nodded. "Don't break yer pick thinkin' too hard. If'n it is, someone's gonna be wonderin' where it went. An if'n it ain't, we just come up with a mouthful a' feathers. My bet is, Mr. Vinnie did the poor fella right here." She rapped on Carson Auto's overhead door and it slowly inched up. Smitty, a silly grin on his face, stood just inside.

Greg scanned the joint. "You think this is the safest place to keep it?"

Nurse chuckled. "You ever wear glasses?"

"No."

"Well I did, 'til I weren't able to see no more. And I'll be hog-tied in a hornet's nest if'n I couldn't find 'em while they was a sittin' on my own head! Nah, they wouldn't think to look here. Now we gotta hurry 'fore 'at boy comes back." Nurse waved Ritter forward into the garage. "You 'member where you know 'im from yet?"

"No, not for the life of me. But for some strange reason I think he knows my son."

"No matter. If'n he killed 'at poor fella, we'll be tellin' the law. If'n he didn't, we'll be helpin' 'im outta a butt noose, the one Mr. Vinnie probably got 'im latched in tighter 'an a fiddle string." She waved Ritter back out of the garage as Smitty pulled the door closed.

Nurse was right, no doubt about it. Mitch's tail was in one heck of a noose. One security guard had climbed out onto the back wall and was starting down the elevator shaft from above, while a second was barking orders from atop the disabled car. "It looks like he's just about to the third floor," he called out. "Get the elevator down there." The #1

car, still on the 11th floor, whirled to a start. Mitch felt the vibrations of the tracks and braces. He could see the elevator, strung with power cables like the first one, headed down above him in *his* shaft. Before reaching him, however, it would peel the climbing guard right off the wall. “Not *that* elevator,” screamed the upper guard into his radio. “*Our* man’s in that shaft—shut it down!” But the car continued its decent.

“It won’t stop!” both radios answered in unison.

The car hummed past the disabled elevator, bearing down on the guard. “Tom, get the hell outta there!” yelled the one above. “He’s got the power cable tangled in the rollers!”

A cuss word tripped from the guard’s tongue, causing him to drop the small flashlight he carried in his teeth. Its beam flickered and twirled on the grimy walls as it plunged past Mitch to the basement below. “Jump to the other side!” Mitch screamed up at the man. “Jump!” The guard glanced down frantically at Mitch, then pressed his body up against the cinder block wall to brace himself for the impact. Once more his eyes met Mitch’s, the dim lights panning down from the top of the shaft onto his prey’s face. Then they shifted across to the other shaft. “Now!” screamed Mitch.

The guard hesitated, measured his leap, then lunged from the braces like a hippo out of water. A loud grunt was followed by a groan as he careened headlong into the rails and slid down the wall, his leg jamming up against the next brace. The tracks rattled and the elevator car slid by where he’d dangled only a second before. The 7th-floor bell sounded.

The car maintained its steady descent. Mitch squinted across the shaft to the 2nd-floor doors and likewise pushed himself away from the wall in their direction. He, too, groaned from the blow as he flung himself against the metal doors. Stunned from the blow, he managed to grasp onto the lip at the base of the opening and pull himself awkwardly up to the small crack of light that offered a plausible escape.

Breathing hard, Mitch peered out the half-inch crack. There on the floor below three guards were cramming a metal bar between the elevator doors in the main lobby, trying to pry them apart. Finding a foot-hold between floors, he grappled to push himself up the slick metallic surface. The old elevator above rang the 6th-floor bell, and Mitch silently began counting down the time between floors in order to measure its rate of descent. If he measured wrong, the massive elevator

would flatten him like a nail on a railroad track.

Desperate for some sort of pry bar, he plunged his hand into his pocket to extract Mike's badge. With the fingers of his other hand wedged between the doors, he lunged to grasp onto one of the greasy latches that cinched the doors closed.

The 5th-floor bell sounded, followed by the commotion of angry men—or of caged wild animals—pounding frantically on the stalled elevator's trap door. The banging resounded up and down the shaft. The pounding and the cries for help were accompanied by the groanings of rusted door latches as the pressing guards strained to liberate themselves from their confining prison.

From his cumbersome vertical stance, Mitch put all his weight on the latch, gouging the badge between the doors. They barely budged. Realizing the second door latch needed to be released, he shuffled his feet to raise his right leg. The 4th-floor bell rang. *With any luck they won't be on the second floor*, he thought—just as luck seemingly ran out and the crumbling concrete toehold he was on suddenly gave way underfoot.

Like the primary culprit in a bumbled trapeze act, Mitch hung helplessly from the latch, clinging on by tooth and nail. Then he was falling, his fingers still gripping tightly to the latch. Its handle had broken off, sending him tumbling back onto the lip from where he'd begun. The 3rd-floor bell sounded as he clawed his way back up and grabbed onto the second latch, trying to force the door open. Simultaneously battering at the gap with the badge, the door opened a crack, enough for him to jam two fingers through. With the athletic prowess of his youth, Mitch lifted himself off the ground, wriggled the fingers of his other hand through the widening gap, and wrested the doors apart.

A jumble of fidgety feet and legs of patrons from the restaurant level met his initial gaze. Only a two-foot space linked the upper section of the elevator car and the floor of the restaurant. Hoisting his torso and legs to safety, he turned to watch the crippled elevator buzz past. The 2nd-floor bell gave a loud *ding*, and the heads of the dumb-founded diners turned as one in his direction. He peered behind him once more, staring into the dark void. The ghastly sound of snapping metal and anxious voices greeted the diners as Mitch rolled to his hip, pressed his greasy hands to the carpet and pushed himself to his feet. "I'd use the stairs if I were you," he panted, flashing the officer's badge at

the astonished crowd. Dropping it in his pocket and brushing his hands on his pants, he added offhandedly, “The elevators—they’re out of order due to the fire on the fifth floor.” Blackened face and filthy clothes confirmed his words as patrons spread the alarm: “Fire!”

TWENTY-SIX

SHOWERS OF SPARKS WAFTING out and the turbulent rumbling of snapping cables and electrical pops erupting from the opening only served to confirm the dire situation. Only seconds earlier the man—the crackpot or maniac—had reported fire in the elevator shaft. Now every eye in the room had converged on him.

Mitch fastened his greasy hands on the elevator doors and wrestled them closed. Calling out to the crowd, he'd issued a direct, authoritative command—a phrase he probably heard on TV. “Please don’t panic, and exit the building in a calm manner.” The directive proved only to fan the flames of fear. Mass hysteria carried the day as anxious people rushed from the diningroom. Stepping to the outdated glass-tube fire alarm, Mitch took the pistol from his pocket and smashed the glass with the butt of the gun, then rammed the handle down.

At once hundreds of ear-splitting fire alarms chimed throughout the casino and hotel, adding to the chaos. Men and women darted here and there, following the exit signs. From every bedroom, slot machine, blackjack table and roulette wheel they came. Mitch appeared to walk in slow motion as he sauntered casually through the kitchen door and made for the employee exit. Smiling and carefree, he pirated a carrot stick from the salad bar and popped it in his grease-stained mouth. *Mr. Domenico won't be smiling anymore.*

Indeed, far up in his posh 13th-floor office, Vinnie's fist slammed down hard onto the desktop. The mobster pirouetted on his overstuffed executive chair and snatched his pistol from his jacket, firing three rounds into the elevator doors. The bullets formed a dense, triangular pattern, each hole about a half-inch apart, and had perforated the metal-clad doors at about the same height of a man's head. Three words slipped from Vinnie's livid, bloodless lips. “You’re dead, kid.” He then picked up the phone. “He’s drivin’ a white Escort. Find him!”

The A-team was scattered up the alley and down the street, each posted at an assigned spot, keeping an eye out for the young man. Nurse and Greg crouched behind the carpet covering of the shelter. Fire trucks and sirens could be heard in the distance. Closer by, the tumult of fear reigned, with Three Queens patrons spilling out into the night for several blocks.

“Looks to me like the rubber’s ‘bout to hit the road, Sunny,” Nurse whispered. “‘Member yet where you know the boy?”

“Sorry—still don’t know.” Greg’s heart pounded in his ears. He gazed out at the bedlam. “Doesn’t this scare you?”

“Nah, can’t say it does. Jumpin’ from a movin’ train—now that’s plum scary. And when ya’ can’t see where you’re landin’, well I reckon ‘at’s enough to scare livin’ day lights outta this pert-near seventy-year-old woman.” She parted the carpet door with her gnarled hand.

Greg pondered the silhouette the old woman cast against the open crack. “You jump from trains?”

She turned an ear to the opening, her other hand raised to her delicate lips. “Shhh, someone’s comin’ . . . Runnin’ hard,” she whispered. Greg cocked his head. He couldn’t hear a thing.

Mitch paused briefly at the edge of the parking structure and scanned the street behind him. Placing a hand on the railing, he leapt effortlessly over, into the alley below. He tucked the bottom of his shirt back in his pants and started walking at a casual gait. Loose gravel crunched under his feet as he passed the power box in front of the shack.

“Hold it right there!” a man’s voice boomed from the parking lot. Mitch’s heart skipped a beat. His pace slowed. When the voice called out again, it had turned savage, predatory. “I swear, kid, I’ll spread your measly brains all over the ground if you so much as move.”

Greg fidgeted nervously. It felt like he was about to wet his own pants. Nurse placed a calloused hand gently on his arm, warning him to hold still.

“On the ground—face down!” growled the fierce voice from above.

Nurse had a full view of Mitch now. Slowly he knelt and lay spread-eagle on the asphalt next to the power box. Casting her cloudy eyes upward, she could make out a pot-bellied security guard clamber over the railing that bordered the parking lot and start down the ramp. She reached under her mattress and pulled out a three-foot length of heavy-

walled pipe, kicked her shoes from her feet, and patted Greg on the arm as if to tell him to stay put.

The guard hunkered over Mitch, gloating over his catch. "I gotcha, punk. You got twenty grand that's mine now."

Mitch craned his neck upward to face his captor. From the shadows, Nurse crept nearer, crouched and wound up for the swing. The guard lifted the mouthpiece to his radio and pressed the transmit button. "I got him! We're in the alley."

Like a much more seasoned David standing against a modern-day Goliath, Greg looked on as Nurse expertly dropped the man to the ground. "'At boy's gonna hurt by mornin'," she whistled through her lips. She turned to the disheveled young man, who was clambering from the ground. "You Mitchell Wilson?"

Mitch, still edgy, squinted up and down the alley, then said, "Yeah, and who are you?"

"Name's Nurse. Best hurry, 'fore 'em others come. My friends an' I will help ya'. Now go!" The old woman pointed at the shack. Mitch, beyond asking questions, ran. Obeying the old woman's commands, he crawled through the opening. Inside, Nurse scooted herself back to the shack and started to disrobe. Greg huddled nearby; Mitch remained speechless. Who were these people, anyway? What kind of a person could live like this? It was as if he'd entered a whole new world.

Just down the alleyway, Ritter was lying sprawled at the base of the garage door to Carson Auto Body, an empty whisky bottle teetering at his side.

Nurse's eyes twitched nervously as she peered from their hiding place. "Strategy ain't workin' like we planned. Gotta improvise. Sunny, pull 'em clothes off. Mitchell, cover yourself up an' lay 'long a wall—an' don't move a muscle."

Greg's voice was that of a little boy. "Clothes?"

"No time fer explanations!" groused Nurse. "Get butt naked." She'd already stripped down to a dirty bra and a pair of saggy boxer shorts. Greg turned his face. He was glad he couldn't see that well in the dark. "When this here curtain opens," Nurse went on, whispering, "you start puttin' 'em back on like you been caught wit' your hand in a cookie jar." She pulled a clip from her matted hair, which fell in a clump at her shoulders. "An' make like you mean it!"

The sound of footsteps came from outside. "Over here!" someone yelled.

“It’s Carl. Knocked cold.”

Another voice crackled, “Check behind the power box. See if the old woman saw him.” A sliver of a flashlight beam shot through the crack in the curtain. Nurse got up and crouched at the entrance, clutching her shirt to her chest. When the carpet parted, a beam of light flashed across her naked, sagging skin. As instructed, Greg flew into action, scrambling and kicking to pull his pants up to his waist. The guard’s flashlight dropped onto the gravel, the curtain fell back into place, and a succession of foul expletives and gut-wrenching giggles split the night air. The guard turned tail and slouched up against the power box, writhing in agony and amusement. Clearly he’d been eyewitness to a peep-show that he wished he’d never—ever—laid eyes on. A peek was bad enough; the eyeful he’d been subjected to was too much for any man.

Between giggles, sobs and snorts, he finally came out with it. “The old woman’s got a man! . . . That’s about the grossest thing I ever seen!” Nurse parted the curtain and sashayed out in her boxer shorts. Five flashlight beams converged on her white flesh as she struggled to snap the dingy bra behind her back. Despite the many wrinkles, the almost transparent nature of her skin showed all too well the purplish veins running up and down her wiry legs and arms. The lights glanced off her chalky shoulders and stomach and reflected back into the guards’ eyes.

One of the men stepped closer to investigate. “Who’s in there with you?” he demanded.

Greg crawled from the shack, bare chested, his skin even whiter than Nurse’s. “Lemme help you,” he drawled as he reached over and fastened the clasp of the old woman’s bra.

Nurse whisked the hair from her shoulder and turned to face Greg with a wide, toothless, girlish grin. “Thanks,” she cooed amid the disgusted groans from the onlooking guards.

“He’s gettin’ away!” a slurred voice called from down the alley. Every light beam altered course, panning down the lane on Ritter, who staggered up to them. “The bloke knocked me on me can!” he mumbled. The bright lights directed at Ritter’s face brought his arm in the air to shield his eyes. One foot teetered sideways in the air as he tried to catch his balance, then he tumbled backwards and toppled on the ground, sending shards of broken bottle scurrying across the asphalt, dancing to the music of approaching sirens.

Two guards lit out down the alley past the prone figure. The other three

shook their heads in defeat and crouched over their fallen comrade. The first big fire engine, followed by an ambulance, turned and eased down the narrow lane, its lights washing over Carl, still lying in the road.

Flashing red and blue lights cast psychedelic shadows on the back wall of Nurse's hut as she crawled back inside and wriggled her calf-length cotton dress over her hips and up her waist. Greg stood guard by the power box as the paramedics ministered to both Carl and Ritter, who, respectively, were struggling to stand and holding up an arm that had been bloodied by the broken bottle.

Nurse squinted back out the opening, then leaned over to Mitch and whispered through her hand, "I ain't taken my clothes off for no man in fifty years, Mitchell Wilson, so's you better have a wallop in' good reason for havin' a corpse in your trunk."

Mitch lifted his head and blinked out from the edge of the blanket. "How do you know who I am?"

"Never you mind, young fella, just start explainin'". And not a word a' lies, or I'll have ever' cop in Vegas pointin' his gun in yer face." Nurse drew her thread-bare shirt around her bony shoulders and pressed the velcro together up the front.

Mitch nestled his tired head back down onto the warm concrete and let out a weary sigh. This brazen little woman had just taken out a 300-pound guard with a single blow, then bared her bony back side to save his sorry hide. After a moment's hesitation, he croaked, "I'm in serious trouble." His quavering, gravely voice was tinged with an air of confession. "Maybe it's best if you do call the cops. I'd at least have a chance of staying alive to see my babies born."

Nurse fumbled about in the shadows to find her shoes. "Keepin' alive's what we on the street do best." The old woman's crusty, semi-hostile nature had softened. "My friends call me Nurse." She scooted a metal milk crate over from the foot of her bed and sat down to listen.

Well after midnight, the last of the emergency vehicles pulled away from the alley. Smitty had popped the lock at the back of Eddie's Gym, and now the members of the Alley Team were reassembled in the cramped confines of Eddie's bedroom. "Boy's sleepin' like a baby," Nurse said as she sat bathed in the pale yellow glow of the old man's lamp.

Cap'n slouched on the limp mattress of Eddie's bed, head wagging in dissent. "We's gonna bite a lot a' cotton if we take on Mr. Vinnie, face

forward.” A puff of air blew from his lips. “He’s got more money an’ trash working for him than we can fight. Probably even has a platoon a’ red communist working for him, too.”

Nurse tapped on the rickety bookcase that skirted the table around which they met. “What you thinkin’, Sound?”

He smacked his lips, pondering both their plight and his own personal crisis. “Doctors told me I had three good months, *if* I was lucky. That’s been almost a year and I’ve never felt better. Since I met you guys, I feel more alive than ever before. What’ve we got to lose?” He shrugged his shoulders and nodded at Smitty, who sat silently at his side.

Everyone turned to the dull-witted yet gifted lock-pick, who stroked his stringy beard a few seconds before nodding his approval. Then the group’s gaze fell on Cap’n. The furrowed brow and worried glare communicated all too well his objection.

Nurse stroked the table’s smooth surface with her rough fingers. “We’ll come back to ya’ in a shake. How ‘bout you, Ritter?”

“You can count on me. *I ain’t* no coward.” He shot a glance at Cap’n. “An’ I’m always up for a bloody-good fight.”

Cap’n sprang to his feet. “Who you callin’ a coward, you runty Englishman? You lookin’ for a butt-kickin’? We already kicked your kin outta here once, and I’ll help do it again!”

Ritter skidded his chair back from the table. “Bring it on, slog!” he spat, slapping his chest and dancing on his toes like a prizefighter. Fed up with the British twit’s bluster, Cap’n lunged forward, just as Greg, who sat between the men, scooted back to block his path.

“You two remind me of a couple of mating blowfish,” he muttered, his white teeth flashing. Everyone froze, staring at Greg, whose grin quickly faded. Apparently his manly first attempt to fit in with the crowd wasn’t going over too well.

Cap’n instantly turned his wrath on Greg. “Who you callin’ a blowfish, rooky?”

Greg, surprisingly, didn’t back down. “Hey, I’m no rooky—not anymore. Didn’t you hear? Tonight I got promoted to Major for sleeping with *the* Nurse.”

Sound placed his hand over his mouth. A hushed gasp rose from the group. Nurse reached over and rapped Greg on the chest. “‘At’s ‘nough, Sunny. Don’t need to go into any details.”

Ritter, taken aback by the bombshell, plopped back down on his chair.

“Yeah, I thought I seen you half-naked, flashlights shinin’ on you and all, but I didn’t have me bloody glasses on!”

Nurse’s weathered face took on a slight blush. “We ain’t goin’ there,” she grunted, trying to prod the discussion back to how to handle Vinnie. “Did what had to be done in a pinch, ‘at’s all. Now . . .”

“I don’t know . . .” interjected Greg, his words doused in uncertainty. “How many want to finish talking about this subject?” He raised his hand and the others followed suit. “Nurse saw my keister the first day I met her; cut my pants right off it. Embarrassed poor little Belle half to death.”

“She sure weren’t shy to lance a big boil on me back-side, neither,” Ritter added, stifling a chuckle. “Come t’ think of it, that also was the first time I ever met her.” Nurse hid her eyes with her hand from embarrassment.

Not to be outdone, Cap’n chimed in. “Pulled a patch a’ ingrown hairs from mine. Probably the biggest black caboose she’s ever seen.”

The room filled with laughter as Sound added his poke. “Gave me a flu shot last winter. Made me take it—that’s right, folks—right in the rear! Insisted it was necessary to keep me well.”

Nurse dropped her hand. “‘Taint true,” she spat, struggling to keep a straight face. “I didn’t go out lookin’ fer you—you come to *me*!”

“But you *enjoyed* it, didn’t you now?”

Smitty, not one to be left out of the fun, stood, turned his back to the room, and pulled his pants part way down on one side, exposing his upper cheek.

“My land o’ seven dwarfs!” Nurse cackled, her eyes wide and youthful. “‘At boy’s th’ fairest of y’all. An’ not a single hair!” To roars of laughter, Smitty hauled his pants back up and flopped back down in his chair, a satisfied grin on his lips.

“You need a bath, Snow White,” Greg snorted between tears. Smitty shook his head violently as the room once more broke into a barrage of chortles and sighs.

Nurse’s hand cupped her slanted mouth. “He ain’t had a bath as long as we known ‘im. . . . Like pullin’ teeth to get ‘im to the shelter once a week for a hot shower.”

Smitty, in turn, grabbed hold of the base of his chair with both hands as if to say, “I ain’t budging from this chair!”

It took five minutes for the Alley Team to regain control and wipe the

tears from their eyes. Nurse gave one last chuckle. "I ain't laughed like 'at for years," she said as she patted Greg on the leg. The rest of the clan offered silent nods. "We's glad to have ya' in th' family." Greg reached out and stroked the old women's hand. She'd saved him from certain ruin. He was most grateful.

Nurse finally broke the silence. "Time we vote. Gotta decide if 'at boy can join us or not."

"Before we do," Sound interrupted, "did he tell you how he got hooked up with Mr. Vinnie in the first place?"

"Did. . . . Said the whole thing started one night when he was tryin' to keep some drunk from blowin' his brains out. Took place just down under th' viaduct, off th' boulevard."

Greg's head sank to the table. "Oh, man . . ."

"What is it? asked Sound.

"*That's* where I know him from. . . . *I'm* the one he saved." All present could've heard an eyelash drop. "I didn't think life was worth living without my money and family. I remember . . . he asked me what my son would think. That set me to thinking. . . . I owe him—and all you—my life. . ." His voice trailed off.

All eyes fell to the floor. There was no longer need for a final vote.

TWENTY-SEVEN

MITCHELL. MITCHELL WILSON—up an’ at ‘em!” Nurse gently shook her newest recruit’s arm.

Mitch grunted, yawned, rolled to his hip, and leaned against the wall before rubbing the cobwebs from his eyes. “Sorry—must’ve fallen asleep,” he mumbled. “Where was I?”

“No matter. We got ‘portant business t’ discuss. Foller me an’ keep quiet. You’re hotter ‘n a cast iron skillet on blazin’ coals.”

Nurse drew the curtain and waited for Mitch, who raised to his knees and groped his way toward the opening, bumping his head on the low ceiling. A lump already on the back of his head, he let out a low moan.

“Gotta watch yer noggin, boy. Th’ room ain’t made fer standin’.”

Ashen-faced, Mitch stepped from the shelter. Nurse waited for the “all clear” from Sound, who was stationed at the back door of Eddie’s gym, then lit out like an alley cat crossing a four lane highway.

When the Alley Team had convened once more in Eddie’s bedroom, Nurse got right down to business. “Gotta move quick. Ain’t safe here no more. Mitchell Wilson, these ‘re my friends, an’ ever’ last one’s ready t’ help ya’ get ‘at tar-baby off yer back. Now I knows we don’t look like much more ‘an a one-legged man in a butt-kickin’ contest, but you seen what we does in a pinch. Got street smarts—th’ kind Mr. Vinnie’s never seen ‘fore. So you want us t’ help ya’, just say so. If not, Ritter an’ Sound here’ll show ya’ t’ yer car and getcha on yer way.” Ritter nodded; Sound, his head tucked into his skeletal shoulders, raised one hand from his lap in a gentle hello.

Nurse drew her lips tight. Everyone turned expectantly to hear what the young man’s answer would be. Like a new law team with their first client, they waited. Mitch lowered his head, rubbed his eyes, scrunched up his face and struggled to form his words. “It’s not . . . that I don’t appreciate what you did for me out there, but . . .” Greg carefully watched the body language of the team as Mitch spoke: Sound

put his hand under his chin to keep his pointed chin from falling into his hollow chest; Ritter folded his arms as if he bore some sort of grudge; Smitty, his arms wrapped around himself, tugged on his beard; Cap'n, the squad's second in command, stood stone-faced, the veins popping on his forehead; and Nurse chomped her gums and focused the best she could on the prattling young man. "... but I don't know a thing about you and ..."

Ritter slid his chair out across the floor behind him and opened his mouth to speak. Nurse raised her fingers and pretended to zip her mouth shut, then motioned for him to sit down. The old matriarch paused and once more turned to Mitch, motioning for him to finish his thoughts. "... and I could never ask you to put your lives in danger for me. I don't think you have a clue what you're up against."

Nurse's lips broke into a big smile. "Been hopin' you'd say somethin' like 'at. Now I wanna introduce my friends proper-like." She pointed to the big military man, sitting at her left. "Cap'n here's 'bout the strongest fella I ever met, yet he's got a heart a' gold. While's you 'n' me were havin' our talk, he was out on the street learnin' what he could. Tell 'im, Cap'n."

Cap'n jerked down hard on the front of his open coat, snapping it against his chest. "Seems some young dude disabled two a' the three elevators at Three Queens, 'fore he started a whale of a panic—somethin' 'bout a 5th-story fire. Word's out that the phantom might be some sort a' Federal agent. Had a gun and everything. Management don't have a clue who the guy is, but all the bouncers and security guards say he's got forty-grand on his head."

Nurse nodded her approval. Then she turned to the middle-aged guy coiled up on his chair. "Ritter?"

"The Guard's name's Carl—'at's the one that had his bloomin' gun pointed at your head last night. The ol' boy's got a chipped tooth and a broken jaw. Thinks there were two a' you in on the whole bloody thing and were trying to steal Mr. Vinnie's car. Rest o' the guards think the old woman in the alley has a mate." Ritter refolded his arms across his chest to signify his report was complete. Greg, sitting at Nurse's right, leaned over and put his arm around her waist, a leering grin planted on his lips. The rest of the team snickered as the old woman shooed him away. Mitch smiled from the lingering embarrassment of having seen the old woman's backside.

Sound started in before Nurse even acknowledged him. "The maids say that someone fired a gun in Mr. Vinnie's thirteenth-floor suite.

Some say three shots, others say four.” He gesticulated with his hands as he spoke, pantomiming each point he made in frenetic circles and jabs, as would a musical conductor. “Mr. Vinnie told the police it must’ve been the commotion in the elevator they heard. The police don’t even have a suspect to charge the false alarm to, and Mr. Vinnie couldn’t . . . or wouldn’t help them.” The thin fellow slapped his hands on his knees. “Oh, and my name—since I became homeless, that is—is ‘Sound.’ I used to work as an electronics specialist.”

“Our friend Smitty here’s a locksmith.” Nurse pointed to the mute man. “Worked for his daddy ‘til th’ poor ol’ man died. Can’t say much, but don’t mean he’s dumb like ever’one says. Just does more thinkin’ than th’ rest a’ us.”

Smitty opened his mouth in a gaping smile, baring his black and rotting teeth, nodded and offered his hand in friendship, then shook Mitch’s hand vigorously.

“An’ Sunny here, you already met a short time back.” Nurse gave Greg a pat on the leg.

“My real name’s Greg Hart,” he said as he uncrossed his legs and blinked back the tears. Mitch stared hard in the room’s dim light, past Greg’s bristly chin, peeling skin, scruffy clothes and greasy hair. The man stared earnestly back at him. “I owe *you*,” Greg continued, “and my friends here, my life. Thank you . . .” He stood and took a step across the small circle to offer his hand. “I hope you’ll forgive me for the pain I’ve caused.”

Mitch stood to return the gesture. “I found you. . . . I mean . . .” Greg, full of emotion, leaned forward and took the young man in his embrace.

“A’right,” said Ritter. “‘At’s enough a’ your bloody love-makin’. We gonna get on with a fight, o’ what?”

“Ahh, leave them alone,” Sound replied, then pressed his hand to his mouth to suppress a yawn. “I thought it was rather sweet.”

Cap’n smoothed his bearded face with his massive hand and likewise let out a shallow shriek of a yawn. Smitty silently imitated the gesture.

Nurse intervened. “Don’t let a sheep out yet, boys. Got work t’ do ‘fore ya’ hit them downy pillows.” She turned back to face Mitch. “Well, young fella. What you got to say now?”

Mitch squirmed in his seat as he tried to organize his words into a posi-

tive phrase. "Well, I'm definitely impressed with your, uh, resourcefulness. . . . And . . . well, I'm . . ."

"Spit it out, boy. Ya' gonna cast your lot with us? Yes 'r no?" Cap'n demanded.

"Yes . . . And I think we can bring Vinnie down."

"*Think?*" Cap'n and Nurse uttered in unison. Cap'n pounced first. "If we go to war, we might not be comin' back."

Nurse jumped in the moment Cap'n paused for a breath. "An jus' cause we's crazier 'an a rubber crutch don't mean we can't whoop 'at young pot-licker and send 'im packin' with his tail 'tween his legs." She smacked her fist in her open hand. "Now get goin', boys. You're movin' slower 'an cold tar in winter goin' up hill."

When Mitch got up to leave, Nurse took him aside for a word. "Young fella," she said, her face serious, "I thin' 'Mitchell Wilson' just disappeared fer a season or two. We'll call ya' 'Greased Lightnin' for now on. Be best no one but your close friends here knows your real name." She took him by the arm and gently directed him toward the door. "So, Lightnin'," she called out to the group, "got anythin' else 'sides your friend in 'at car you need 'fore we torch it?"

Ritter's eyes lit up. "Aright! Haven't lit a bloody-good fire in years."

"Sorry, Ritter, you needs to get Eddie's ol' truck runnin'. Smitty'll start th' fire and Cap'n'll get th' body outta the trunk. Now, young fella, like I was sayin', you need anythin' from 'at car?"

"My suitcase. . . . Oh, and the phone in the glove box."

"You heard 'em, now get th' lead out," the old woman scolded.

"Hey, I could fix the truck," Mitch offered. "And we might want to hide Mike's car—it's still parked out front."

Nurse paused in thought. "Come on, Nurse," Ritter begged. "Let me blow the roof off his bloody garage. I swear, I ain't about to get nobody hurt. I'm a pro at fires; if I light it, it'll look like a blasted accident. Sound'll start a torch like an amateur fire bug's had one too many brews."

"He's right, you know," remarked Sound. "I've never lit a building on fire before."

Greg couldn't believe his ears. "I'm not very comfortable with arson," he finally said. "We could all go to jail for a very long time."

Nurse shook her head. "Ain't likely. The place's been scheduled for demolition since December. I been scroungin' through Mr. Vinnie's trash a

long time. Seems he's been stallin' so's t' keep his business runnin'. I just ain't had th' nerve t' tell nobody 'cause I didn't want ol' Eddie endin' up on th' street like we is. Word is, whole darn block's comin' down t' make room fer a new casino."

"Doesn't Mr. Vinnie own the property?" Greg asked.

"Far as I can tell, some big corporation back 'n Jersey does. Now if'n you and Lightnin'll watch th' alley an' fix 'at ol' truck, it just might keep you from bein' part a' th' trouble. I gotta go get my papers. The Reverend said they'd come in handy one day." She hurried off to her shack.

Ritter, Cap'n and Smitty strolled casually down the alley. Stopping in front of Carson Auto, they glanced around to making sure they were alone. After Smitty worked his magic on the lock, the garage door slid up a few feet and each crawled inside. Near the power box outside Nurse's shack, Greg hunkered down to keep watch, while Sound waited on the far end, down past the body shop.

Meanwhile, in the side alley beyond Nurse's hideout, Mitch opened the squeaky door to the old pickup and checked the ignition for a key. A quick probe under the ashtray, behind the visor, and finally under the rubber floor mat produced a single key that fit the ignition. Mitch pressed the floorboard starter down and listened to the old engine crank over, then cough and die.

In a matter of a minute Mitch had removed the battery cables, cleaned the connections with his pocketknife, pressed them tightly back on their posts and reclosed the cover in the floorboards. Turning the key again, the battle-worn truck backfired, sputtered, and finally roared to life. The steady rumble was pure combustible music to Mitch's ears. He tapped the dash and shut off the engine. "They sure don't make them like this any more."

Inside the hut, Nurse, a penlight wedged between her lips, transferred papers from one old metal milk crate to another, until all her personal information was crammed into one highly disorganized vagrant file system. She gathered up the motheaten wool blanket from the bare mattress and, wadding it up in her arms, fed it out the curtain near where Greg sat. "Sunny," she whispered in her gruff old voice.

Greg took a step toward the hut as she shone her light from between the curtain. "Sunny!" she repeated, a bit louder.

"I'm here," Greg answered.

"Take the blanket down th' alley an' tell Cap'n to wrap up Lightnin's friend so it looks like he was sleepin'. An tell Ritter we's gotta hurry—he ain't writin' no college thesis, you hear?"

Greg wandered down the alley and rapped lightly on the garage door. By the reflective light from the parking structure he could see Smitty's eyes, shoot back and forth like a guilty school boy caught in the teacher's lounge.

The door rolled up a foot and Smitty's smiling face peered out from below. "Give this to Cap'n and have him wrap the body in it," Greg whispered, thrusting the blanket underneath. Smitty nodded, then pulled the door down with a soft thud. As Greg turned around he was startled by a harsh banging on the glass pane in the side door.

Cap'n's enormous white eyes stared wildly out the window. "Here're the keys to the car out front," he said through the glass. "And Ritter needs a candle; ask Nurse," he ordered. "Then bring that truck down here so we can move out the troops."

Greg slid the keys under the door and stepped sharply up the alleyway. From the other direction came Nurse, bent over, dragging her crate, on her way to the pickup point. Mitch jumped from the driver's seat and offered to lend a hand, then hurriedly jumped back in the truck—having been on the blunt end of a hushed reprimand to stay out of sight.

After the old woman returned and rummaged through her hut one more time, she emerged with a half-burnt candle about four inches long and a single match. "Sunny," she whispered, pressing the candle and match forward, "tell 'em boys to wait 'til we pull th' truck alongside th' door. Them guards are due to make rounds. An' tell Ritter this here's my only match, so make it count. Then get 'at dead boy's car outta sight. Ya' never know when it might come in handy. . . . And make sure ya' shove th' keys up th' tail pipe."

Once again Greg skulked down the alley, feeling more like a messenger boy on wall street than a homeless executive. A light rap on the door again produced Smitty's smiling face, followed by Cap'n's harsh stare. The door slid up and Greg passed the match and candle underneath, along with Nurse's whispered instructions.

Ten minutes later Greg sat on the passenger side of the old Ford pickup, Mitch on the driver's side, with Nurse sandwiched in between, her

bent legs straddling the stick shift. Mike's car was parked safely in Three Queens' garage. The old woman whispered over to Mitch, reminding him to keep an eye on the parking structure through the cloudy rearview mirror. "Them parking lot boys have a favorite peep show on cable. Don't get out on their rounds 'til 'bout two. I can hear 'em walk-in' overhead ever' night, same time. But ya' never know. . . ." She gave Mitch a poke in the ribs with her bony elbow. "What time you got?"

Mitch squirmed in his seat and pressed the light on his watch. "Five till."

"We'll wait 'til ten after. No sayin' if'n your shenanigan changed their routine or not."

Inside the dark garage, Ritter crawled out from under the Escort and spanked the dust from his pants and shirt. "'At ought'a bloody-well do it," he said with the pride of a college grad. Carefully pinching the lone match between his thumb and index finger, he struck it on the floor. It sparked, then blazed into a tiny flame. "Twenty minutes, plus or minus two, I'd bet the family pub on it."

Cap'n bristled in anger. "You stupid redcoat," he growled. "I told you that were our only match! You were supposed t' wait 'til th' truck came."

Ritter finished lighting the candle and bit his cheek to hold back the scathing barrage of insults that had formed on his tongue. The serious nature of the task at hand and Cap'n's imposing stature seemed the only things holding it at bay. He and Cap'n had never gotten along that well. If he let loose now, it would surely explode into violence. Something more important was about to explode. In fact, a puddle of gas was dripping from the gas-tank and spreading slowly in the direction of the lit candle, which Ritter had stuck firmly to the floor by a few drops of wax.

"You stupid redcoat . . ." Cap'n repeated.

The volatile words proved to be the last spark. Already at the end of his fuse, Ritter now unleashed his barrage, full-bore. "You always callin' me a redcoat!" he howled. "Kind of like callin' the kettle *black*, ain't it? Big strong *boy* like you, and your own army don't even want you." He rose to full height and slapped his chest with both hands. "Come on, let's bloody end this right here. Last man standing walks away, the other stays—gets *burned* to a crisp!"

Singed to the core by the racial smears, Cap'n's already smoldering temper blew. He bullrushed his longtime rival, shouting, "Don't no white

man call me *boy*! An' you, redcoat, is gonna be the one that gets burned!" Ritter doubled his fist and took a swing. Cap'n lifted his own brawny hand and snatched the flying fist out of the air. Giving it a vicious shake, he squeezed down hard. Bones popped like brittle tooth-picks. The pain dropped the Englishman to his knees and a blood-curdling scream could be heard rattling the rafters.

Smitty, standing watch at the garage door, began stomping his feet up and down like a Mexican hat dancer with his pants on fire. Cap'n looked up, his face that of a child in shock. He released his crushing grip and pushed Ritter away with a final warning: "Settle down, ya' hear?" Ritter slumped onto the grimy concrete, writhing in agony, his hand cradled against his stomach.

Cap'n went to see what all the commotion was about. Smitty, wide-eyed and panic-stricken, pointed frantically out the window towards the parking garage. The mute's troubled gaze shifted back and forth between the cowering Ritter and some horrible scene outside the window—where, in the early-morning shadow, a security guard patrolled the parking lot. Turning sharply on his toes, the guard's gaze fell on the garage door. A moment passed, whereupon he turned away and continued on his rounds.

Cap'n knelt over his suffering colleague. "Sorry, Ritter. Didn't mean to hurt ya'. But you shouldn't ought'a' done that."

Still clutching his broken hand, Ritter moaned and rocked side to side on the floor. Finally he managed to mutter, "You broke me hand, you . . . you bloody, dumb ox!"

Cap'n looked on sheepishly. "Weren't on purpose. You made me mad. Shouldn't ought'a' swung on me . . ."

Slumped inside the cab of the truck Mitch and Nurse watched as the guard ambled up the employee parking ramp and out of sight. "Looks like he's gone," Mitch finally said, half holding his breath. "Should we go?"

Nurse held up her finger. "Ten seconds more."

Mitch subconsciously counted in his head, then started the old truck, which rolled backwards until it was fully into the alley. He tried to shift gears. The transmission groaned in protest. "The clutch is gone—or maybe the syncro," he muttered, shutting off the engine. "I've got to drive it with the motor."

Nurse fidgeted. "Whatcha mean? We's sittin' ducks if ya' don't get

movin'."

"Don't worry." Mitch slammed the shifter into first, turned on the key and pressed the starter pedal to the floorboard. The truck lurched ahead. "If the battery'll hold out, I'll drive it like a trucker."

"An if'n it don't?"

"We'll have to get out and push." Its motor whining, the old truck bounced down the alley, lights out, and lurched to a stop in front of the garage door.

Inside, Smitty turned to the apologetic Cap'n and snapped his fingers, then motioned with his hands like he was driving a truck. Their ride had arrived. Cap'n hoisted the cursing Ritter up on his feet. "We's got to get out of this building 'fore she blows. Smitty, get your tail over here. Grab this here suitcase and open the door."

Smitty shuffled quickly around the men to retrieve the suitcase while Cap'n bent to the grim task of removing Mike's body from the trunk. Effortlessly, he lifted it and lay it gently down on the wool blanket. After wrapping both ends in on top of the stiff corpse, he flung the load onto his shoulder. Ritter was first to the door. Still hunched over nursing his hand, he scanned the alley and waited for Smitty to lift the overhead door.

By now a cloud of fumes had collected inside the structure. The strong smell of boiling oil and gas grew more noxious with each passing moment. Gasoline steadily dripped from the car's pierced fuel line, forming an ever-growing puddle. From beneath the car tires, it spread ever closer to the flickering candle.

Cap'n approached the door with his grisly load. All at once he reeled around, sending the blanket billowing open. Just inches from the end of his nose, Ritter found himself staring into the ghastly face of the fallen agent. Again, the Englishman's blood started to boil. "Smitty," urged Cap'n. "Don't forget the phone. Said it's in the glove box." Smitty retraced his steps to the car, now a ticking time bomb.

Meanwhile, outside the door Greg climbed from the pickup and pressed his face up to the window to see what was holding up the three firebugs. From down the alley, Sound had stepped into the faint light, his hands held high in the air, rambling on about "not having a clue to what the officer was referring to." Then the figure of the security guard loomed from the shadows, his gun trained on Sound's chest. Seeing what was happening, Greg motioned Ritter and Cap'n back away from the window.

"I thought I heard someone back here," the guard stated matter-of-factly as he forced his captive over next to the driver's window. "Looks like I caught you bums stealin' Eddie's truck." He tugged a flashlight from his hip and aimed its beam directly into Mitch's face. Mitch raised his hand to cover his eyes.

"Steal, my hide," Nurse hollered from one seat over, like she was deaf. "Can't steal somethin' you been borrowed. 'Sides, this ol' truck's worse 'an a dog can't scratch."

The guard sized up the man behind the wheel, demanding, "And who are you?"

Nurse tore into the guy. "You ever been sued for pointin' a gun?" she growled. "See, this here's Eddie's grandson from back east where them rich folk live. Came to Vegas to see his dyin' grand-daddy, and now you's pointin' 'at big ugly piece at 'im. His daddy owns th' biggest law firm in Boston," she rattled on, lying between her teeth. "Can't say for sure, but my bet is when he hears 'bout you he'll be filin' criminal charges too!"

While all heck was heating up outside, inside the garage it had become hot in the literal sense. Cap'n, Ritter and Smitty flattened up against the front door, primed for escape. Mike's body and the suitcase lay on the floor near the bay door. "Looks to me like that twenty minutes is about up," Cap'n rumbled. "Bad timin' and your rotten temper's gonna get Nurse killed if we don't get out a' the trenches and go hand-to-hand combat." With that, he catapulted Ritter out into the street.

"Shut up, you old bag," barked the guard. "This guy's probably the one Mr. Domenico's been lookin' for. You had him out here the whole time, hidin' in the alley? Look at him. Still greasy from his monkey business in the elevator shaft. If I got the right guy, I just earned myself forty grand."

Greg, slouched in the bed of the truck, joined in, trying to persuade the guard he was in the wrong. "Before you fly off and do somethin' you'll be sorry for, officer," he drawled, "you better consider what she's sayin'. He was just workin' on this old truck, that's all, so we can go see his grandpa. I seen what happens to someone like you that points his weapon without probable cause. You're a civilian just like we are, hired by Three Queens to keep the peace. The only difference is you got a permit to carry a gun and we don't. Same thing happened to me last year workin' at the Palace. I got carried away with my weapon—lost my job, then lost my wife and family from the civil suit filed by some drugged-up attorney. Now look at me—homeless, just like my friends here."

The guard wavered, then slid his gun back in his holster and inched away from the truck, projecting his beam from Greg to Mitch, and back to Greg. No one here was being aggressive or acting flighty. “Forty grand? Not worth it,” he said as he reached for his radio. But I’m gettin’ some help down here.”

The thunder of army boots slapping the pavement and the rustle of Cap’n’s coat echoed through the alley. Rattled, the guard fumbled with his gun, flashlight, and radio. Before he could fully spin around, Cap’n had raised him off the ground in a suffocating bear hug. As from a ruptured balloon, a torrent of air rushed from the guard’s lungs. Sound reached out and caught the falling gun; the flashlight and radio clattered to the asphalt.

“‘At’s enough, Cap’n,” Nurse called out, grabbing onto the steering wheel and pulling herself over to the window. The guard, his lungs unable to take in a breath, kicked helplessly. “Cap’n,” she again cried, “‘at’s ‘bout enough!” Seeing that Cap’n wasn’t responding to her pleas, she pushed at Mitch. “Open this door!” she shrieked. Mitch scrambled to get out of her way.

Sound tugged in vain at the big man’s green flak jacket. “You’re going to kill him!” he screamed. “Let go . . . let go.”

Nurse’s feet hit the ground. “Laurence Elroy Jackson, your mama’s gonna whip your backside with grandpa’s cane, ‘less you put ‘at boy down. Now you let go, you hear!”

The big black man’s face softened and his arms relaxed. The guard slumped to the ground, a wet rag on a washboard, unconscious from lack of air. “Sorry, Lou,” he whimpered, blinking at the collapsed guard, “you shouldn’t ought t’ve pointed your gun at my dog.”

Nurse took a handful of his coat. “Cap’n, this ain’t Lou, and you ain’t sixteen no more. Ya’ done good—we just don’t want ‘im dead, is all. Now, hurry up. Put ‘im in the back a’ th’ truck. It’ll be better if he ain’t here when th’ garage goes.”

The Alley Team tore into action, clambering to toss all the tools, the suitcase and the bodies—which now numbered two—into the truck. Just as the bottom of the garage door hit the concrete, Ritter began to squeal, “It’s gonna blow any second!”

Greg leaped into the driver’s seat and forced the starter to the floor. The truck convulsed, then stalled. “We’ve got to push!” he shouted. Just then the inside of the garage lit up from the glow of sparks meeting

compressed fumes and boiling gas.

Cap'n bounded from the back of the truck and ordered everyone to stay inside. Heaving his enormous shoulder against its rusty back fender, he began to push. With a little speed, the truck's engine popped and gunned to life. Cap'n jumped onto the back of the careening truck as it shot down the alley.

Three blocks from Carson's Auto Body, the A-team gazed back at the billowing ball of fire and smoke that heaved into the old downtown sky. Through the frenetic black morning, Las Vegas's unremitting casino lights shimmered on.

TWENTY-EIGHT

FORD'S MEAT PROCESSING & Frozen Food Locker Plant faced the tracks off Colorado Street. The crumbling brick building had long served as an icon to the homeless. Melburn Ford had run the plant since the '50s, when his father passed the family business down. Every winter, after Mr. Ford filed notice on the delinquent locker rentals, he'd systematically—one each day—emptied the contents of the various lockers onto the docks near the dumpster.

On any given winter day, if they arrived in the wee hours of the morning, those veteran vagrants who were aware of the arctic buffet could sort through various cuts of meats, frozen vegetables, ice cream, prepared pasta dishes, and every other imaginable frozen food. Some had suffered slight freezer burn, other items were fuzzy with frost, and others were simply unmarked and unidentifiable. Yet most was edible.

The county health department had unsuccessfully sued old-man Ford for distributing such food products without proper government inspections. But in his methodical, old-fashioned manner, Mr. Ford had simply reputed all charges by claiming the food needed to be partially thawed in order to avoid freezing to the walls of the dumpster and becoming too difficult to extract. He was not responsible to post guards at his trash receptacle any more than the next business. At one time the health department had posted their own people at the dumpster to chase away the unwanteds. This lasted for only a short time, however, largely due to the fact that old-man Ford simply stopped dumping at regular intervals and left a small garbage can either upright or turned down on the dock, thus inviting his friends to come—or not—the following morning. The health department was none the wiser to the clever scheme.

Nurse pointed out to Mitch where to park at the back of the dilapidated storage building. Once more she craned her neck to check the bed of the truck to assure the Three Queens guard was still soundly cuffed, tied and

blindfolded. No longer unconscious, his flinching jaw communicated a clear combination of outrage and foreboding.

The truck pulled behind the building. No one spoke. Sound took hold of the guard's one arm, Mitch the other, and they hauled him from the truck and led him to the front door of the locker entrance. After waiting several moments, Smitty raced around the building, rattled the door, then dropped his pick set to the knob, freeing the brass bolt. The cold, stale air from the monstrous freezer system blew across their faces when the old wooden door swung inward.

When the gag was removed, the guard immediately blurted out, "Wh—where're we going?"

"Shh," Mitch hushed. "We're not going to hurt you; we just need to lock you up for a few hours. The owner will be in by morning and let you out." He guided him through the dark office to a dimly lit and very long hallway. Metal lockers lined each side.

"You can't do this," the guard insisted. "This is kidnapping."

Mitch peered down at the name-tag on the guard's pocket. "Earl, we're not the bad guys—and you shouldn't have pulled your gun on us. The guy that's going down is your boss, Mr. Domenico." That said, Mitch pulled the guard's hands up and uncoupled one of his arms from the handcuffs. Then he dropped the cuff through the metal handle to a locker and latched his wrist again.

In the meantime, Cap'n-Mike's blanket-covered body slung over his shoulder—had, with Smitty's help, entered through the basement door at the back of the building. Nurse had been busy opening and closing each of the storage lockers in the basement.

"This one here ought'a do it," she announced, peering up at the locker's number: 418. She waved Greg over to help unload the freezer's contents onto the floor.

Five minutes passed. At last, fingers numb from the cold, Greg set down the last of the wrapped packages of meat and looked on as Cap'n lugged Mike's body to the back of the freezer. There he arranged his load, bending the Federal agent's stiffened elbows and knees into a fetal position.

Nurse lowered her head. "We promise, friend, ya' won't be here long. Soon as we can put blame on the man responsible for yer murder, we can bury ya' proper like. Flowers, tears, a preacher t' say pretty words an read from th' good book. . . . We'll make sure it's done right."

"Amen," Cap'n whispered over the rhythmic hum of the refrigeration units. "And like my mama used to say, rest in peace with them angels above."

Nurse pointed to the mound of packaged meat and gestured to Cap'n and Greg to begin stacking it tightly around the body, and soon the corpse was completely obscured by the screen of steaks and rump roasts.

"Now, with a little luck, whoever keeps this here meat in number 418 won't be havin' no fancy southern barbeques. If'n they does, I'm 'fraid our friend's gonna crash the party." She tucked her hands under her armpits and shivered. "Burr, this here cold ain't good for an old woman's rheumatism."

Outside the larger freezer upstairs, Mitch lay the guard's flashlight and gun on the front desk. The radio he clipped to his own belt. Pulling a heavy winter coat off a coat rack near the cooler entrance, he returned to where the guard was tied up. "The place opens at eight, Earl," he said, bundling the coat around the man's shoulders and lifting the hood over his ears. "That's less than four hours. If you start to get cold, keep moving."

Earl studied his captor. "Why's Vinnie got a price on you?" Mitch didn't answer. "You're the one he's after, aren't you?"

Mitch took hold of the strings that hung down from the front of the hood and drew it down tight over Earl's bald head. "Sorry if my friend hurt you. Now remember, keep moving." The guard nodded. Mitch shut the locker door and walked past Sound, who waited to secure the front door.

"You're a real nice guy," Sound whispered. "The man was going to turn us all over to Mr. Vinnie."

"He's a pawn. Doesn't know much of anything. Probably has to work nights and weekends just to feed his family. I'll bet he doesn't have any clue Three Queens is being demolished."

"You're probably right." The thin man yawned. "All I want is a soft bed, silk pj's and a down pillow like the old days." His voice faded off as he crawled back into the bed of the truck and lay his head on the splintered wooden slats.

Ritter, meanwhile, was perched on the front bumper, still coddling his broken hand. Mitch leaned against the fender and listened.

"I ain't never seen the big ox lose his bloody temper 'fore," Ritter carped bitterly. "Didn't realize I been playing wit a bloomin' stick a' dynamite all these months."

Mitch responded simply with an “uh-uh” and a nod.

“I ought to know better than to play wit’ fire by now, too. Gives me a high on adrenalin that takes a week to come down from. It’s like a smack a’ glass.”

Mitch looked on without a hint of what the brooding man was talking about.

The Englishman rattled on. “Not that I been usin’ or nothin’. Been clean since ‘96. I been talkin’ right big since ‘fore I skipped England in ‘72. And here me is, right sod, an’ nothin’ but a 47-year-old addict livin’ on the bloody streets a’ Vegas. Time I changed all that. ‘Bout t’ hit me the lotto, an’ maybe settle an old score wit me kid brother.”

Nurse, Greg and Cap’n surfaced from the basement and gathered around Mitch. “So what’s next?” asked Greg.

Nurse shrugged her stooped shoulders. “Don’t rightly know. Got any ideas?”

Greg’s eyebrows raised a whole half inch. “You don’t know?”

“Been doin’ pretty good by the seat a’ our pants, ain’t we?”

“We have, but we’ve got to put a plan together if we want to win instead of just get away. We need to know where we’re going.”

“Well, Mister smarty-pants, ya’ think ya’ know so much, tell us what we ought’a do.”

Mitch leaned away from the fender, stretching his sore back. “I think we all need a good night’s sleep before we decide anything. I’ve got twenty-grand under the seat of the truck. It won’t hurt to spend a couple hundred on a hotel room or two, get a hot shower, a good night’s sleep. . . .”

Smitty nodded ‘no’ to the idea of a shower and ‘yes’ to a good night’s sleep. Sound lifted his head from the truck bed. “Did you say hotel? I’m in.”

Nurse shook her head. “No reason t’ get soft just ‘cause we’s got money now.”

Greg begged to differ. “I think we should sack out for a day. We need time to plan, anyway. Plus, if we’re going to carry out our mission, we need to renew our strength.”

Cap’n looked over at Nurse, then scanned the little band of vagrants. “I agree with Nurse,” he said. “We don’t need no hotel. We can stay at my place under 15.” Smitty nodded in agreement.

Nurse did a quick tally. “So ‘at makes three ‘at wants t’ go t’ a hotel, an three ‘at don’t. Ritter, what about you?”

“Don’t make no mind t’ me. You bloody well better drop me at County so I can get me hand mended.”

Sound again piped up, as if the matter were finally settled. “Well, then, the three of us can go get a room at the T-bird; a friend of mine works the night shift. And the rest of you can go spend the night under that noisy bridge.”

Nurse dismissed the idea outright. “No!” she spat, wagging her head. “We best stay together. It’ll take ever’ one a’ us t’ keep an eye on the other. No sayin’ what kind a’ friends Mr. Vinnie’s got.”

Greg nodded reluctantly. “I agree with that.”

“Looks t’ me like it’s up to you,” Nurse drawled, getting up in the Englishman’s face. “Yes or no?” Ritter seemed lost in thought. “Ritter, yes or no?” she repeated.

“Yes—the hotel. But first drop me at County. I’ll find you after they finish wit’ me broken hand.”

Eddie’s truck rumbled from behind Ford’s locker, wheezing and rattling up the road. Cap’n, Ritter, Sound and Smitty sat low in the back, while Nurse again perched herself between Mitch at the wheel and Greg in the passenger seat.

“Can’t be wanderin’ the streets like we been doin’, ya’ know,” Nurse said.

Greg eyed his street-wise mentor. “How do you mean?”

“Mean like some kind a’ crazy family. Soon as ‘at guard gets loose, he’s gonna squeal like an old stuck sow. Won’t be much time ‘fore Mr. Vinnie knows all about who we is.”

“You’re right. I’ve been thinking the same thing. And I might have a plan.”

“You got somethin’ you’s holdin’ back, now’d be a good time t’ spill yer guts.”

“Not yet. I learned a long time ago not to make a proposal unless I had the resources to follow through. I’m still not sure it’d even work.”

“Have it your way.”

The truck cab fell silent, except for the sound of the old rag tires clawing at the road and the grinding of metal between each gear. Mitch stayed off the main roads, instead opting for the sleepy neighborhood streets. County Hospital was halfway across town and well out of the route to the T-bird Hotel.

Four blocks from the hospital, Ritter knocked on the back window and

hollered, "Set me down on the corner, mate. I'll find the rest of me way on foot."

Mitch pulled over to the curb near a corner streetlight. Ritter hopped down and cast a final, silent glance at Cap'n.

"I didn't mean t' hurt your hand, you ornery old redcoat," Cap'n said, a tinge of warmth in his voice.

Ritter shrugged. "You're alright, pet. Weren't your fault. I should'a never swung on you. It just gets me so bloody excited to be 'round a good fire. 'Sides I ain't been me-self lately. Pert near wet me own knickers every time." Ritter slapped the fender and stepped away from the vehicle. "Be seein' you," he called out.

Mitch pressed the starter to the floor and clattered away down the street. As Ritter set off in the direction of the hospital, he looked back over his shoulder. "Yeah, be seein' you real soon," he muttered under his breath.

Waving, Sound called out over the roar of the truck, "We'll be at the T-bird—sleeping on real beds with clean sheets, a tub to soak in . . ." His voice faded away. Ritter looked on. Already he was feeling bloody guilty for what he was about to do.

TWENTY-NINE

IN A QUIET NEIGHBORHOOD across town, Stephanie's tired eyes blinked back the bright sunlight that flooded through Maggie's guest-room window. Rolling from the bed, she pulled on her robe. The smell of fresh bran muffins wafted under the bedroom door.

"Stephanie—good morning," Maggie beamed. "Did you sleep well?"

The younger woman lifted her inflamed eyelids and forced a smile. "There's nothing like a good cry to make me sleep like a baby. What I need now is a swift kick or a stiff cup of coffee to get me moving."

"I'm sorry, I don't drink . . ."

"No, no, I didn't mean that. I quit drinking coffee too when I found out I was pregnant."

"Well, then," Maggie chuckled, "how about the swift kick, some juice and a warm muffin?"

"That'd be wonderful," Stephanie laughed, hefting herself onto a bar stool. "—minus the swift kick, of course."

Maggie scooted a small plate of bran muffins across the counter and poured a tall glass of orange juice.

Stephanie peeled the paper from the side of one of the golden-brown cakes and took a bite. "They're heavenly," she purred.

"It's an old family recipe, one my great grandmother wrote in her journal while she traveled across the Wyoming plains. She was in a handcart company in the 1800s. Granny Parry didn't have the ingredients to make them herself, but wanted her daughter—my grandmother—to know how to bake them when she reached the Salt Lake Valley. My great grandmother died two days later, just a few hours before a relief party arrived to bring them to Utah. They had to bury her in the snow, since the ground was too frozen to dig a grave."

Stephanie finished chewing and lowered her eyes, her hand still up to her lips.

Maggie let out an embarrassed sigh. "How silly of me to ramble on

like that,” she scoffed as she wiped the bar with a dish towel. “I heard it so many times as a child I didn’t think I’d ever repeat it.”

“No, don’t apologize. That’s the most tender story I ever heard. You must miss your grandmother terribly.”

“I do—but enough about that. You need to make a call to St. Louis and let that man of yours know you love him.”

“I will as soon as we finish. Now tell me more about your grandmother.”

Maggie left the room and returned carrying an antique photo in each hand. Her fingertips traced the rims of the old portraits, she recounted the hard lives her progenitors had faced by choosing to leave their home in Denmark, sailing to New York, joining up with a company of other pioneers and making their way across the plains. Only months after arriving in Utah, they were sent south to settle Las Vegas.

Stephanie’s eyes lit up. “Las Vegas? Your people helped found Las Vegas?”

“My family was one of the first to come, sent here by Brigham Young himself.”

“I’ve never heard that before.”

“Most people haven’t. . . .” Maggie looked up at the little teapot-shaped clock on the wall above the sink and gave a start. “Oh, my! Look at the time. We’re going to be late for work—and there’s nothing like getting on Kirsten’s bad side first thing Monday morning.” Both women rolled their eyes, then scurried to their rooms to get dressed.

The Federal Building’s regular Monday morning hustle and bustle seemed no different than usual, except for the “bum” asleep in the bushes outside the west door. Agent Shane Barnes couldn’t help but overhear the secretaries who sat outside his doorway. Speculating on the tramp’s fate, they’d organized an informal, loser-buys-lunch-for-the-winner office pool: would the guy be arrested or simply chased away? *Chased away* was the odds-on favorite.

From the doorway to his office he asked, “What in the world are you two talking about?”

“Didn’t you see the transient in the bushes by the west entrance?” one of them asked.

“Nope,” replied Barnes, “I don’t use that door.”

The secretary stuck her nose in the air and gave a haughty sniff. It

was her good-natured way of poking fun at the ‘uppity, hoity-toity big shots’ who were assigned parking on the east side. Barnes chuckled, then gave instructions to send the janitor out to chase away their vagrant friend. Returning to his desk, he shuffled through a few papers before retrieving voice mail from his phone.

First new message, the computer said. *Sunday, 3:55 pm.* “Barnes, it’s Mike,” the message began. “I tried your mobile—it didn’t seem to be working. I’ve got an appointment with Mitch and Vinnie. It looks like we might have our foot in the door. I’ll call again when I’m finished.” The machine beeped.

Barnes, clearly annoyed, clicked the receiver down. “Hot shot cowboy can’t follow protocol,” he huffed under his breath. He dialed the phone. “Agent Hale,” he added, “I’ll be happy when you go home and stop chasing the big bust.” The line rang and rang. No one picked up.

Commotion from out in the lobby prompted Agent Barnes to hang up the phone. The janitor stood in the office entrance and spoke softly over the screaming, coming from down the corridor. “This fellow says he knows of one of your agents. When security wouldn’t let him in, he just flew off the handle, yelling and screaming ‘bloody’ this and ‘bloody’ that. I can’t even tell what he’s saying any more. He’s got a cast on his hand; busted one of the guards real good with it.”

Barnes stepped to the door and peered down the hallway toward the west entrance. Two security guards were dragging the foul-mouthed vagrant back out towards the exit. “Huh, thanks, Jed,” Barnes said, glancing at the man’s security identification pinned to his shirt and giving him a condescending pat on the back. “I’m sure they have it under control.”

“Mike Hale!” The name echoed down the hall like a voice from the dead. “Agent Mike Hale! . . .” the bum kept screaming.

Barnes’s stomach twitched and his muscles drew taut as his casual attitude crumpled like a pallet of sticks. No one but those on the force knew Mike’s real last name. “Hold it!” he yelled, jogging down the hallway. “I need to talk to that man.”

When the guards ceased their dragging, Ritter shook loose and stood upright. “I told you, you ignoramuses!” he chastised the guards. “You’re both bloody thicker than a brick!” He reached down and tucked his shirt back in his trousers. One of the guards also felt the need to tidy himself up, tilting his head back to stanch the flow of blood that

trickled from his nose.

“You go get cleaned up,” Barnes nodded to the injured security guard. “And you,” he turned to the other, “bring him to interview one.”

Seated at a single desk, Ritter, still smoldering, waited in the small interview room. His elbows balanced on the desktop, chin in hands, while Barnes instructed the office to locate Mike. Then Barnes turned on the ‘record’ switch, opened the door to interview one, dropped a notepad on the desk and took a seat across from his vagrant-tipster.

“For the record, please state your full name, date of birth and address,” Barnes started.

Ritter looked up at the camera, then at the notepad. “You think I’ll just come waltzing in here wit’ me guts hanging out for you to snatch up? You want the information I got, you got t’ do the listening.”

Barnes vaulted to his feet. “Why don’t I just *waltz* you down to lock-up for assaulting my Federal security officer?”

“Fine wit’ me. Three hots and a cot, air-conditioned room, probably a might better ‘an me flat at the shelter.” Ritter folded his arm across his broken hand and leaned back in his chair.

Agent Barnes stomped out and closed the door. After checking with the office to see if they’d been able to reach Mike, he returned. Ritter was still sitting with his legs crossed under the table and one hand propped behind his head, perfectly content.

Barnes tried again. “How do you know Agent Hale?”

“Don’t.”

“What do you mean ‘don’t’?”

“Don’t know him.”

“Then I’m wasting my time. . . .”

“Whatever you say, bloke. It’ll cost you for me time.”

Barnes stood again and walked out of the room. “Stay with him,” he instructed security. “Let him wallow in his own smell awhile.”

The entire office was in a tizzy, a madhouse of scrambling agents, all searching for Agent Hale. “Find him,” Barnes urged, real worry seeping into his voice. “Check the garage; pull the tapes; track his phone. I won’t allow this arrogant little runt to order me around like he’s the King of England.”

Vinnie’s penthouse office had become its own sort of madhouse. The fire department had informed him that the apparent cause of the

blaze was a broken switch in the Escort's brake lights. They'd been found charred and mostly consumed by the fire. As best they could determine, the wiring had ignited the carpeting in the trunk and boiled the gas tank until it exploded, taking the body shop down with it. They were still trying to locate the vehicle's owner.

Clint, meanwhile, had done his best to locate Stephanie. A search of the rented house had turned up nothing more than a dirty kitchen, the Camaro still in the garage, and toothbrushes missing from the medicine cabinet. Al Kostecki had been promised a \$5,000 bonus if he would watch and notify Clint when the "girl" returned.

Inside the Three Queens, electricians and elevator repairmen had spent most of the night restoring power to one of the disabled cars. The other two would be down several days, while waiting for parts to fix the antiquated lift.

Clint, his arms folded across his chest, sat askance on the arm of the leather chair opposite Vinnie's desk. Frank stood by the door leading to the stairs. "Wait in the hall, Frank," Vinnie ordered. Frank blindly obeyed.

"Look, Vinnie, you always knew I wasn't in it for the long haul," said Clint after the door had closed. "I spoke with my old lady last night. She thinks me and the old man can work out our problems. Besides, it's time to shut down the operation and get on with the new casino. You've got plenty to retire on, if you invest it right."

"I ain't no stockbroker," Vinnie growled, "and your problems ain't even started, *Clinton Stewart Thurston the Third*. If Eddie turns over his information, you'll be run in for credit card fraud, racketeering, forgery, money-laundering, and whatever else the Feds can pin on you. You think the old man'll be willing to go to bat for his delinquent son with them kind of charges hangin' over your head?"

Clint squirmed in his seat and flicked his gelled hair from his forehead. Vinnie stood, walked to the bar, poured a drink. Then he gave a little laugh and said, "Remember that little tramp claimed she was carryin' your kid?" He sauntered back to Clint and set the drink on the table at his knees.

Clint shot a look at the drink, then looked up, confused. "Yeah . . . what about her?"

Vinnie smirked. "You didn't really think she'd just pack up and go back to Iowa, did you?"

Clint reached over and picked up the drink. In a single motion, he jerked it above his mouth and gulped it down. "You son of a . . ."

"Not to worry," Vinnie interrupted with a wicked smile. "They ain't even identified who she is. Probably never will. And even if they did, what are the chances they'd ever match your DNA with those tiny bones of your kid?"

Clint banged his empty glass on the table and shot to his feet. Vinnie met him eye to eye, staring him down, his right hand poised inside his jacket.

Doubling up his fist, Clint waded forward at his fellow criminal. "You're some piece a' work, and I'm . . ."

Pistol in hand, Vinnie jabbed it into Clint's muscular chest. "Not today, you ain't! You want a piece of me, get in line. Afraid of dying ain't got no part a' my life. Either do somethin' about it, or take care a' your part a' our contract and get the operation back up."

Clint, mid-stride, came to a halt. His jaw flexed sporadically. A few tense seconds passed before he backed down and retreated to the safety of the one working elevator. Vinnie continued with his demands. "I want that kid's woman by nightfall. I don't care if you got to drag her outta where she works, you find her. Once you do, I'll send Frankie to pick her up."

Mr. Ford, a bent, barrel-chested old gentleman with thick woolly eyebrows, stood on the dock in front of his storage building, listening to Earl Watts, the Three Queens guard, tell his story to the Vegas police. "I'm telling you, they weren't criminals. I've been thinking about them all night and I got no intention of filing charges." Old-man Ford had heard it all before the police arrived. He sympathized with Earl, even mentioning to the guard the Health Department's flagrant, futile attempt to stop his own "dumpster donations."

The police weren't about to let Earl pass the incident off so casually. "I'm sorry, Mr. Watts, kidnapping is a Federal crime. It's out of our hands—and yours. The Fed boys are on their way down here. If we find who locked you in that freezer, the best we can do is charge them with breaking and entering. The Feds can do much more than that . . ." The officer turned to Mr. Ford. ". . . that is, if Mr. Ford is willing to cooperate."

Ford shook his head and buried his hands deep in the pockets of his

wool trousers. Pivoting back into his office, he mumbled a few cynical words about “beating down the little guy while the big guy just gets bigger.” He draped a worn parka over his dingy white shirt and glared out the window.

A beige sedan with Federal plates bounced across the gravel parking lot, coming to rest between the two Vegas squad cars. The resulting wave of dust trailed behind, ultimately coming to settle on the cars, the nearby weeds, and the corrugated roof of the old storage building. A fine layer also managed to coat the two dark-suited agents.

Both men buttoned their jackets in perfect unison, surveying their surroundings. As they traipsed up the crumbling steps leading to the dock, two of the police officers came out to greet them.

After several minutes of discussion filled with the requisite points, nods, and glances, the agents and officers followed the dock to where Earl Watts stood. As per protocol, both agents removed the badges from their jackets and held them in front of the guard’s face. “I’m Agent Barnes and this is Agent Horne.”

Earl looked over the badges and associated identification, then compared the pictures with the agents’ faces. “Okay.”

The agents paused, their ID’s still held vertically, as if counting off a specified cadence before proceeding. Finally they folded their wallets and returned them to their suitcoats. “Earl Watts, correct?” Barnes asked. Earl nodded. “For the record, I need your date of birth and social security number.”

Agent Horne, a tall, angular, sandy-haired man in his late 20s, took out a scratch pad and began to scribble notes as Earl began repeating the information he’d already shared with the police.

“You work for Three Queens?”

“Just two weeks.”

“You know Vincent Domenico?”

“Met him once.”

“What do you know about him?”

“Not much. Pay’s fair, lets management run things, likes fast cars.”

Barnes forged on. “Tell us again about how you were brought here.”

Earl exhaled and began to recount the event in greater detail. He’d pulled his gun on a group of vagrants . . . out of nowhere, some big black guy grabbed him and squeezed him around the chest until he passed out. . . . They brought him to a meat locker and tied him up. That was pretty much it.

Barnes considered what he'd heard. "Why does a security guard carry a gun inside a casino?"

"They pay three bucks more an hour if you get a permit."

"So why'd you pull your gun on a bunch of homeless people?"

"We had some trouble last night. Somebody set off the fire alarm and disabled the elevators."

"Yeah, we heard." Barnes, already aware of Mitch's greasy fingerprints all over the elevator doors, was anxious to move on to the real problem. "You think the guy was homeless?"

"No way. Could have been getting help, but he was too good. He knew just how to go about shutting the whole place down."

"Who do you think he is?"

"Don't know. Only saw a shot of him on the security film. Night watch said Mr. Domenico would pay forty-grand to the one that caught him. I thought it was him driving the old truck."

"What do you mean you *thought* it was him?"

Earl's bald head gave a shake. He seemed to be revisiting in his mind the scenes from the night before. "No, I don't think so," he muttered, more to himself than to the agents. "I must have been mistaken. Head of security said the guy that shut us down was mean-armed and dangerous. This guy spoke softly. He cared about people, I could tell. Like I told the cops, he even came back into the locker to put a coat on me. Even left my gun."

"What did he look like?"

The guard again shook his head. "You ever tried to make an ID from an elevator surveillance camera?"

"How about the guy in the truck?"

"Clean cut, dirty-blond hair, blue eyes . . . looked like an athlete. He seemed pretty nervous. The old lady said he was Eddie's grandson—you know, the owner of Eddie's Gym? I didn't believe a word of it, though."

At the mention of Eddie's name Horne's head jerked up from his notes. He stared over at Barnes, then returned to his note taking. "Did you know the body shop burned down last night?" Barnes asked.

"Cops said it did."

"What time did you walk the garage?"

"Two."

"You're sure?"

“Look, now I could lose my job for saying this, but I know it was two, because every night the gate guard and I watch this girly show from one to two. He keeps this little 13-inch set under the desk. Figured out how to patch into the hotel’s cable line. Keeps us awake.”

Barnes grunted; Horne, still scrawling out Earl’s testimony, offered a faint smile. “I’m sure it does,” Barnes sniffed. “You know what time the fire was reported at the body shop?”

Earl hunched his shoulders. “Some time after two, I guess.”

“It wasn’t on fire while you were there?”

“Course not.”

“Could the same bunch that accosted you have started the blaze?”

“I guess so. . . .”

Barnes ended the interview, then added, “We need you to come down to the office and see if you can identify someone, and maybe help us work up a few composite drawings of your assailants.”

“Listen, guys. I’m already late for my real job, I spent a long night in a cooler, my ribs are bruised, I need a shower and a cup of coffee, and, frankly, if Mr. Domenico was after me, I’d probably have done the same thing. I’m no worse for wear and I shouldn’t have pulled the gun on them in the first place. It was the forty-grand. Dreams of easy street got inside my head and I got a little carried away. That’s all. These people don’t need any more trouble from me.”

“There’s more at stake than charges against a pack of homeless people, Mr Watts. I’m afraid we’ll have to insist.”

The corners of Earl’s top lip drooped into a feeble scowl. He glanced over at Mr. Ford, who gave a gentle nod before renewing his fixed stare out the office window. Turning, the agents escorted the Three Queens’ guard down the steps and to the car.

THRITY

THE HOTEL WAS BUILT in the '60s. Its pool was dry, filled to the brim with gravel and dirt; its tubs and toilets were stained from years of hard-water mineral build-up; mold and mildew grew unimpeded between fixtures and walls; and the furniture stood in gross need of replacement.

Nurse rolled over in her bed, grunting and moaning in her sleep. Greg sat under the dim, 40-watt lamp bulb, sketching out the final details to his plan. It would be risky, no doubt, but as far as he could figure they didn't have many options.

Driving the old truck again was out of the question. The team had parked it on a side street in someone's driveway five blocks away.

Mitch, together with Sound, had made the walk to the T-bird and rented three rooms. They paid with cash, always welcome. At the front desk Sound had introduced Mitch as a friend. The rest of the Alley Team wandered in one at a time, so as not to attract any undue attention, and found their rooms per Greg's instructions. Mitch and Sound shared room #213, while Cap'n and Smitty stayed in #117 near the back and Nurse and Greg were in #103, the one closest to the front.

Amid Nurse's soft snores, Greg pulled the local yellow pages from the battered desk drawer and laid it open on the table. *Physicians*. . . . He flipped back through the pages, stopping at the *Eye doctors* section. His finger skimmed down to one of the first listings—*Cataract & Lasik Center of Las Vegas. Dr. James Clark, Highly Experienced, Caring Surgeon*—and dialed up the number.

A receptionist answered. "Good morning, Doctor Clark's office."

"Good morning," said Greg. "My mother and I are in town from back east. I've been trying to have her cataracts removed for years and I think I finally convinced her it's time. Do you suppose that would be something you could work in, say in the next day or so, before she changes her mind?"

"Hmm, just a moment." The line was patched into a looped ad, which droned on about the many benefits of laser surgery.

The line clicked again. "This is Doctor Clark. How can I help you?"

Greg momentarily sputtered, then said, "I hadn't expected to talk to the doctor."

"I happened to be up front. Tell me about your mother."

"She's 70 years old and ornery as a wild sow. She lives on a tobacco farm in Alabama and never gets out. I've been trying to get her eyes fixed for years. I think I may have convinced her, but it's do or die. She could change her mind at any time."

"How long will you be in town?"

"Two days."

The doctor paused. "Well, it's highly unusual for us to do both eyes in such a short period of time." His voice trailed off as he consulted the receptionist. Greg heard the words 'squeeze her in . . .' Then he came back on the line. "Why don't you bring her in today and let's take a look. If it appears she's in good health and her eyes aren't too bad, we'll see what we can do."

Greg set an appointment for three and asked for directions before he hung up the phone.

A gruff, sleepy voice came from under the covers. "I ain't goin' t' no doctor," Nurse said sternly. "This ornery ol' sow ain't lettin' nobody poke no knife in her eyes."

"You sleep with one ear open?"

"Hafta. If'n I don't, some sweet-talkin' boy like you comes long an' 'fore ya' knows it I'm in more trouble 'an a wasp in a beehive."

Greg walked over and sat on the corner of the bed. "Look, I know you're a smart woman," he began. "You've more than proven it to me, but just like changing my name to 'Sunny' to keep me out of trouble, it's time to bring Rebecca Lambert back to town and send Nurse away. We can't do that until you *look* like Mrs. Lambert. My plan hinges on you being Rebecca Lambert, not Nurse. You need a bath, a hairdo, new clothes, a room at Three Queens. . . . And I've got to teach you how to keep a poker face."

"Poker face, my eye."

"You should have seen the whole bunch of you last night, waiting for an answer from Lightning. You all wore your emotions in your posture. I could tell exactly what you were thinking without you saying a word."

“Could not.”

“Okay, watch.” Greg folded his arms, stuck his chin in the air and leaned back in his chair. “Who am I and what am I telling you?”

“Don’t know . . .”

“Yes, you do. I’m acting just like Ritter when he’s mad.” Greg began to bob his head up and down, then back and forth, as if he were looking for answers from someone else. “Who does this remind you of?”

“Okay, maybe ya’ look like Smitty when he’s wonderin’ how ever’one else is plannin’ t’ vote.”

“Good.” Greg assumed his most macho expression, pretended to pull on his coat collar, took a deep breath, then let out a sigh. “And?”

“‘At’s Cap’n, ‘course.”

Greg then began to smack his lips together and grind his gums, all the while waving his hand at himself like a gibbering mouth. “And?”

“Point made. . . . An’ I don’t talk all that much,” Nurse insisted, “an’ ‘at ain’t hows I look ‘tall.”

“You’re right. I have all my teeth.”

“Now you’s makin’ fun a’ me.”

“No, I’m not making fun. I’m driving a point home. Not only do we need to get your eyes fixed, we need to get you a new set of teeth.”

“I ain’t had teeth in 40 years. Wouldn’t know what t’ do with ‘em.”

“Have you ever seen *My Fair Lady*?” Greg continued.

Nurse shook her head. “Can’t say as I have.”

“Well we’re going to rent it and a few other old movies, and you’re going to learn how to talk like a southern belle.”

A look of indignation crossed the old woman’s face. “An’ what’s th’ matter with my talkin’?”

“You don’t speak proper English. You talk like an uneducated farm girl from the swamps of Alabama.”

“‘At’s ‘cause I is.”

“*That is because I am,*” Greg tried to correct.

“Jus’ like I said.”

Greg scratched at his beard and peered up at the water-stained ceiling tiles. “Why don’t you take a shower. I’m going to send Sound to that store we passed last night and get a few things we need. What size dress and undergarments do you wear?”

“Whatever I can fit in. My boxer shorts say ‘medium’ on th’ label, do know ‘at much.”

Greg chuckled softly. "You won't be wearing boxer shorts for a while, I can promise you that."

Nurse grunted again as she crawled from bed and traipsed into the bathroom. Greg dialed room #213 and woke Mitch from a restless sleep. "Lightning, it's Sunny."

"Who's this?" Mitch replied.

"Greg Hart."

"Oh. . . I thought I was having a bad dream."

"Sorry, I wish it were only that. Look, I need some cash and you need to locate a newspaper and find us a different place to stay."

"Stef," Mitch whispered.

"What?"

"My wife, Stephanie. I dreamt Vinnie was after my wife."

"Where is she?"

"Staying with a friend. . . What time is it?"

"Almost noon."

Mitch sat up, wide awake, and let out a harsh whimper. "She's probably at work!" he exclaimed. "I've got to get her some place safe. Vinnie's been screwing with my credit, so I'm sure he knows where she works."

Greg's heart began to race. "Call her; tell her to stay inside, close to lots of people. We'll have to figure out how to get her out without Vinnie knowing where she's gone."

Mitch flung himself from bed. Sound, sprawled out on the bed nearest the wall, rolled over and yawned, stretched and blinked his tired eyes. "That was the best night's sleep I've had in a year," he crooned.

To say the least, Mitch wasn't paying attention to anything Sound said or did. Jerking the phone back off its receiver, he punched up the number to First Capitol Mortgage, then entered the extension.

"Hi, this is Stephanie Wilson. Today is Monday, April third. I'll be at my desk all day. Please leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as possible."

Mitch waited for the beep. "Stef, it's Mitch. Listen, I'm sorry I left yesterday on such a sour note. A bunch of things are jamming me up right now. I can't explain over the phone. Please don't leave work. *Please*. I'll call back in a few minutes." He hung up the phone.

Sound sat up in bed, a baffled look on his face. "What's going on?"

"My wife. . . If Vinnie wants me bad enough, she isn't safe."

"I should say not. What if he already has her?"

Mitch recoiled at the thought. "No, she made it to work. She changed her voice mail this morning."

"Thank goodness." Sound breathed out a sigh of relief. "What are we going to do?"

"I'll try again in a minute."

Inside the bureaucratic bowels at First Capitol, Stephanie took little note of the flashing message light on her phone. Removing her headset, she struggled to her feet and peeked through the door of Maggie's cubicle. "I'm starving," she moaned, kneading the small of her back with her hand. "And my back's killing me."

Maggie lay her own headset on her desk. "I've been there before," she said sympathetically. "By six months my hips were so sore it felt like my legs were going to fall off."

"Not fun."

"It doesn't happen to everyone."

"Thank goodness."

The women gathered up their belongings and started down the corridor toward the time clock. "Don't let me forget to pick up my dry-cleaning," Maggie said.

Kirsten's office was located at the end of the hall. As they neared, she gave them both a cold stare, her phone pressed to her ear in the middle of a call. Finally as they neared her desk, she reached over and pressed the mute button. Leaning into the hallway, she called out, "Late in the morning and early to lunch?"

Maggie approached the team leader and gave her a gentle pat on the arm. "You have a nice lunch too, dear," she said sweetly.

The timely and bold—and utterly hilarious—act left Kirsten seething with rage. Stephanie put a hand to her mouth to stifle an outburst of laughter, though a girlish snicker did manage to escape. "I can't believe you did that," she finally whispered as they swiped the clock. Stephanie peeked back to see the reaction on Kirsten's face. "Oh my gosh," she shrieked, flabbergasted, "she's flipping us off!"

Maggie exited the office, her expression a conflicted state of giddy remorse. "Oh, dear, I shouldn't have done *that*," she moaned. "I promised myself I'd never say anything mean back to her."

"What can she do, fire us? We don't even *have* a set lunch hour."

"You know, Stephanie, that woman has been determined to see me fired ever since I started here. She's told me several times that an 'old woman' has no business working. The last thing I need to do is drag you into my quarrel."

The elevator door opened and both women stepped into the crowded car. Stephanie studied the faces around her to make sure no one was listening. "Maggie, you're my best friend," she whispered. "If she's going to fire you for being old—'more mature,' I mean—and me for being pregnant, let's go see management."

Maggie raised a finger to her lips and waited for the elevator to come to rest on the main floor. Both women walked down the congested hallway and out the parking exit before Maggie resumed their conversation. "In fact," she confessed, "I've started keeping a record of her discriminating remarks. If you do the same, we can defend ourselves if she does something drastic. In the meantime, I'm going to apologize for what I said and try to keep the peace."

"How do you do that?" Stephanie asked.

"What?"

"I don't know—apologize so easily, calm things down."

"When you grow up the oldest of thirteen children and raise a household of your own, you learn to get along." Maggie paused to scan the parking lot. "I forgot where I parked."

"Way back," Stephanie pointed, then added, "Maybe that's my problem. I'm one of two children—spoiled rotten."

Maggie dismissed the comment with a chuckle. "You're not spoiled rotten. You and Mitch live on a shoestring, like most newlyweds."

"No, it's not the money part; that's easy compared to building a relationship. Mitch is always so good to me. The other night I tried to be the first to apologize, and he still beat me to it." Stephanie turned to stare at an old car down the way, parked nose out. "I've been hanging around my mechanic-husband too long." Maggie turned to see what it was Stephanie was looking at. "That car's a 1965 Cadillac convertible. Mitch would be drooling over it right now."

Maggie abruptly looked away. "And its owner is wondering what we're staring at." They both headed off in the direction of Maggie's mid-size.

Maggie had been right. The monstrous black man behind the wheel of the '65 Caddy peered down at the photo in his hand and back at

Stephanie. Then he picked up his phone to place a call. "I've got her," his deep bass voice vibrated through the car. "She's with another woman—and they already made me."

"Made you?" responded Clint.

"She was looking at my car or something."

"Stay back. Find out where they're going and keep in touch."

The big man bristled. "Listen, man, guardin' your operation downstairs was one thing. Kidnappin'—that's goin' too far."

"Who said anything about kidnapping. Just let me know where they go. I'll take care of the rest."

"Whatever you say." Ty hung up the phone.

Maggie unlocked her car and opened her door to let out the heat before both women climbed in. "Maggie, would you mind if we went to my house for lunch?" Stephanie asked. "I left food on the stove yesterday, and I'd like to pick up our other car so you don't need to chauffeur me around."

Despite her insistence that it was no trouble at all to 'chauffeur' her young friend around, Maggie agreed. Then the conversation shifted back to the thorny subject of marital relations.

Ty followed Maggie's gold Saturn at a comfortable distance. Just five blocks down the road he was cut off by a city bus that pulled across three lanes of heavy traffic in an attempt to stop at the curb. His view of Maggie's car was suddenly blocked. At almost the same moment, Stephanie interrupted Maggie mid-sentence and pointed to the Academy Dry-Cleaning shop immediately to their right. "Oh, thanks for reminding me," said Maggie. She pulled to the shoulder, turned, and headed for the drive-through window at the back of the cleaners.

A hundred feet back, Ty anxiously waited for the bus to move. When it had finally dropped off its passengers, a full minute had elapsed. A minute after that, he was on the phone. "I lost 'em, man."

Clint's temper flared up. "How could ya' *lose* 'em!" he raged. "They driving a Porsche or somethin'?"

"No, this . . ."

"Forget it! Just forget it and go back to wait where she works."

A quiet room, air-conditioning, a padded carpet to lie on . . . the Federal building wasn't a bad place to catch a nap. The stench in the room was the only drawback. For that reason Ritter lay as far away from

the trash can as possible.

Barnes and Horne had spent most of the morning rounding up suitable candidates to act as stand-ins for a line-up, each resembling a homeless bum. It also took several hours for the agents to retrieve and view the video surveillance tapes from the garage.

Earl, the security guard, had cooperated with a composite artist skilled at high-tech computer sketches, but after a few hours of poring over hundreds of different eyes, noses, chins, mouths and hairlines, his brain was fried. After a reasonably exhaustive effort, he finally conceded that the renditions were a close match.

Mounting pressure to determine the whereabouts of Agent Hale brought Barnes storming back into interview one. Finding Ritter sound asleep, the agent whooped, "On your feet!" followed by a poke to the ribs with the toe of his shoe. "Let's go!"

Ritter cracked an eyelid and gazed up with a smile. "What . . . we goin' out for a brew?"

Barnes's face scrunched up and his nostrils flattened. "What's that foul smell?" He coughed and pinched his nose shut, holding his breath.

"Oh, sorry, mate," Ritter answered. "It's a right cheeky smell, ain't it? Your man, here, told me t' get back in me closet when I told him me guts weren't feelin' so . . . so 'spot on,' you might say, an' I needed a trip to the loo. So, made me own loo outta your trash basket, I did. Probably shoulda' right well tied up th' bag when I was finished, shouldn't I of?" Barnes pushed Ritter out the door and slammed it shut. "Maybe you can ask him t' take it out, mate, in case we be comin' back?"

Barnes jerked his head to alert security what was up, then led Ritter down the hall to a narrow viewing room. One of its walls acted as a one-way mirror. After receiving a handful of hasty instructions, Ritter found himself standing against a wall, face forward, holding a "#3" card in front of his chest, one of six contestants, each appearing almost as shabby and impoverished as himself.

Barnes's voice came from behind the glass. "Men, please turn to the right."

The five other men turned right. Ritter, however, purposely turned left, then clumsily excused his blunder. "Sorry lads. Wasn't sure if he meant *me* right or *his* right."

Barnes ignored the sorry act. He let go of the intercom button and turned

to Earl. "Do you recognize any of these men?"

The guard surveyed the ragged group. "No. . . ."

"Were any of them there last night?"

"Sorry, I've never seen any of them."

"Take your time."

"No need. None of them are even close."

Barnes pressed the button again. "Let everyone go but number three. Take him to interview room two." Then, turning to face Earl, he explained, "Mr. Watts, we have some video you need to look at."

A minute later and a few rooms down, Earl, Barnes and Horne were staring at segments of video from Mike's garage. The audio had been turned off. The first clip showed Mike bent over a tool chest, pulling tools out for Mitch to borrow.

"That's the guy driving the truck last night," Earl insisted.

Agent Horne perked up. "Which one?"

"That one." Earl pointed to Mitch.

Barnes crouched closer to the screen. "You're sure?"

Earl nodded. "Your video's better than those at Three Queens. They're a fuzzy mess."

With a few other lesser details out of the way, Earl was let go and Barnes and Horne paraded through the door to interview two. Ritter was stretched out on the ground with one hand propped under his head and the other—the one in the cast—resting on his stomach.

"Trenton Ritter, born April 18, 1953. Selby, Yorkshire, England. One of seven children born to Tommy and Milda Ritter," Barnes read from his notepad.

Ritter sat up. "A spot on, mate. Been doin' your studies, you have?"

Barnes continued. "Came to the states at seventeen, two years later married Sharon Carter. Divorced two years after that and never paid a dime of child-support. And," he added ominously, "violence was involved."

"'At's a lie!" shouted Ritter. "Worked me backside off them first few years, I did, an' I *never* hit her. Not once!"

Barnes got up in his informant's face. "Shut up and listen." Ritter, his sassy attitude quickly fading, slithered over and settled into a chair by the door as Barnes finished reading off his notes. "Married again, you became the deadbeat dad to three more offspring. You were arrested thirty-seven times for minor drug charges in the last ten years, three

times for suspected arson.” Barnes slammed the notepad down on the table and sat nose to nose across the table from his target. “You’ve never dealt with the FBI. You want to play games with me you better be very smart. I’ll stick you on a skewer and roast you over your own fire.”

Ritter squirmed in his seat. “I ain’t been arrested in three years. Got me act together, I have. Killed me bad habits when I stopped takin’ drugs . . .”

Barnes slapped the table hard. “I didn’t say you could talk yet!” Another deadly stare and he referred again to his notes. “You were drunk last night and treated by a paramedic team for some lacerations. By pure coincidence, early this morning—in the same alley—a body shop burns to the ground. Again by pure coincidence, a call comes into the Vegas PD that someone was murdered in the garage the day before.” Barnes, bluffing all the way, paused for effect. “My bet is, if we march you to the lab and take a sample from your filthy hands, we’ll find the proof we need to hang you for both a murder and a fire.”

Ritter stole a glance at his hands, then placed them in his lap. “I ain’t murdered nobody.”

The agent clenched his teeth and leaned his face across the table, only a half-inch from Ritter’s, the words coming out one by one. “I’ll tell you again—I didn’t say you could talk yet.” Ritter clamped his mouth shut and swallowed hard. Barnes went on reading from the stack of notes. “You stop at County to get your hand fixed around 4:30 a.m. and leave the hospital this morning at 6:45. Our cameras pick you up at 7:15, then shortly after 8:00 this morning you assault a Federal officer. For a guy with your record, that’s a minimum ten-year sentence. I’m ready to bet you broke your hand setting fire to the garage—probably another twenty years. And as soon as we nail a murder on you you’ll get life. So, Mr. Ritter, is that what you *waltzed* in here for?”

The tramp blinked, then lowered his head. “I think maybe I need a . . .”

“Maybe we better back off a bit, Agent Barnes,” Horne interrupted before the man could spit out the word ‘lawyer.’ He also was sensing that the Brit had made yet another attitude adjustment. “Mr. Ritter might be able to make a few dollars and help us out at the same time.”

Ritter brightened. “At’s what I came down here for in the first place, mate.” Snubbing Barnes, he turned to talk to his partner. “Information I got oughta’ be worth ‘bout 50-grand. But pickin’ my brain’ll be worth it to ya’.”

Barnes laughed out loud and turned his back to the men. Horne sat down

next to Ritter. "Let's talk. What information might you have?"

"Wit' all the information you got, you bloody well know your Agent Hale's missin' now, don't you, mate?"

"Fifty-grand's a lot of money for the location of an agent," answered Horne calmly.

"Not if he's dead—an' you want to recover his body an' catch the murderer, it ain't."

Horne shot a sobering look at Barnes, who had already guessed the worst. The head agent's shoulders slumped in frustration. "We'll have to talk to the Special Agent in Charge." Barnes rose from his seat and stalked from the room.

THIRTY-ONE

MAGGIE DROVE DOWN the cul-de-sac and up the driveway in front of the run-down garage. "There's not much to eat inside," Stephanie apologized as the women stepped from the car. "And you might have to help me open the garage door. It didn't work last time."

"I had that problem once," remarked Maggie. "My daughter had to show me how to pull a rope to manually lift the door."

Stephanie blushed slightly. "Oh, so that's what the little rope is for. I thought it was to tell you how far to pull the car in. I always stop when it's even with my windshield." She fumbled in her handbag for her keys and turned to look next door. Joan's car was parked in the drive. "Thank goodness Al's not out or he'd be over here harassing us. Believe me, you don't want to meet him." She shuddered at the thought. "He's the grossest man I've ever met."

Maggie swung open the screen door as Stephanie reached for the lock. A bright orange notice laying between the door and the screen caught her eye. Picking up the paper, she read aloud the first few words: "*Three-Day Notice to Vacate.*"

Safely inside, Stephanie slumped down on the couch and read: "*You are hereby ordered to vacate the premises and surrender possession of the subject premises to the Owner. If you fail to vacate the subject premises within three days after this notice is served upon you, you will be deemed guilty of an unlawful detention and legal action will be taken against you. . . .*"

"Oh, dear," she gasped. "Mitch promised he'd take care of it before he left town. Now what am I going to do?"

"I'm so sorry, dear," Maggie said, putting an arm around her young friend. "Well, we'll just have to deal with it, won't we?"

Stephanie felt like the ground was quaking beneath her. "How can we? Three days? We can't possibly move out in three days."

Maggie pondered the matter. “Let’s take things one step at a time. Why don’t you see if you can call Mitch’s hotel while I clean up the kitchen. You’d be surprised how being single has toughened up this old woman.” Maggie lowered her voice to a high alto, at best, and flexed her flabby arms.

Stephanie laughed—then began to cry, daubing the tears that appeared on her cheeks. “That’s exactly what Mitch does when I complain about Al.”

Both women lit into their assigned tasks, Maggie humming a tune in the kitchen, Stephanie growing more frustrated by the minute. The hotel Mitch had planned to stay in said he never checked in. The registration office at the National Vocational Competition claimed he hadn’t registered, either.

In the house next door, Al sat snoring in his easy chair. A collection of empty beer cans cluttered the floor to his right. A handful of cigarette butts peppered the residual brew on the carpet. The noontime news blared from the television as Andy wandered up from the basement in nothing but his leopard-print bikini underwear. He opened the fridge. With a cold blast of indignation and a string of crude language, the younger Kostecki marched to the living room and gave the pile a wild kick, sending droplets of beer, cigarette ashes and empty containers scattering in his wake.

The flames long since fed and fanned, Al exploded awake in a violent verbal brawl of his own. The vulgarities soon led to a swinging of fleshy arms and doubled fists, one that connected squarely with the side of Andy’s listless head.

The young Kostecki careened across the living room, colliding with the dividing wall to the kitchen. As he hit, the sheetrock crumpled like a used tissue under his bulk. Recovering his senses, Andy clambered up and shouted, “What was that for?” Then, brushing sheetrock dust from his arms and thighs, the young troublemaker tried to reason with his bully-of-a-dad. “You drank my beer again. You . . .”

Another string of Russian cuss words cut Andy off. The boy knew better than to wake Al from his morning nap—when suddenly the elder man started to laugh. “You broke the vall, you stupid vomans man!”

Andy didn’t see what was so funny. “Yeah, so?”

“So you keep me ‘wake all night banging walls downstairs vit dat

voman. Maybe I go down and bang walls too.”

“Andy glanced at the stairway leading to the basement. “She’s so hung over she wouldn’t know the difference. And for a couple of beers she’ll . . .”

“Shut up in there!” Joan screamed from the bedroom. “I’m trying to get some sleep!”

Fearing the wrath of the tough old broad, the men lowered their voices. “I put beer back soon,” Al vowed. “I find dat girl next door, I make ‘nough money to buy beer for three months.”

Andy appeared puzzled. “What about the girl next door?”

“Watch. She come back, I get paid big bucks.” Both men gazed out the window to the next house.

Andy flinched. “It looks like your lucky day, pops. Someone’s there.”

Al snatched up the phone. Outside, he could see Maggie’s gold Saturn.

“Look! It’s come unplugged,” Maggie said, pointing at the garage door opener. “Let’s get a chair and plug it back in.”

With the cord back in the outlet and a touch of the control clipped on the visor of the Camaro, the double-wide door—its gears knocking and squealing—groaned upward. Stephanie took a deep breath and let out a sigh. “Finally,” she muttered.

“Don’t you worry about the house, Stephanie,” Maggie consoled. “It’s probably nothing. We can sort through it after work. And I have a few dollars you can use if you need to.”

“It’s not just the house; it’s Mitch. Where is he?”

“I’ll bet he’ll call you at work this afternoon, or at my house this evening. He’s probably so busy he forgot to let you know that his plans had changed.” Maggie went out the front door and walked to her car. “I’ll meet you back at the office.”

Climbing into the tidy ‘97 Saturn, Maggie backed out into the street to wait for her coworker to follow in the Camaro.

From next door Andy yelled at his old man. They’re leaving! You’d better do something fast!”

Maggie pulled down the street a few yards and watched in her rear-view mirror as Stephanie backed down the driveway. Confident that her young friend was safe, she then coasted to the end of the street and rounded the corner.

Reaching up to the visor, Stephanie pressed the door opener and waited for the garage door to shut. It rolled down a few inches, then jerked to a stop and retracted back to its open position. She tried again. The motor, nearly shorted out, again refused to push the door down. Stephanie glanced over at the Kostecki home. Al was nowhere to be seen. It was then she remembered Mitch's itinerary, sitting inside on the countertop. The airline could confirm if he had made his flight. Leaving the car idling on the driveway, she took one last peek over at the neighboring house and made a dash for the open garage.

Meanwhile, Al had bolted from the front room and out the back door. Together with his no-good son, he lumbered out onto the street and up the driveway, stopping in front of the garage. Al panted like a dog on the prowl. "Go to front door. . . . Now I show the girl real man." Andy backtracked to the idling Camaro and, leaning through the driver's-side window, yanked the keys from the ignition.

Inside the house, Stephanie folded the itinerary and shoved it in her handbag. Then she headed back to the garage. The sound of the overhead garage door creaking closed stopped her in her tracks. Looking up she watched the door handle turn. "Maggie, is that you?" No one answered. "Maggie?" The eery silence made the hair on her neck stand on end.

Two blocks away Maggie pulled to the side of the road to make sure Stephanie was still following. She hadn't rounded the corner from the cul-de-sac.

Meanwhile, Stephanie fled to the front door, her only means of escape. Just then Al shoved his fat head through the garage door, a lewd grin stretched across his cheeks. Stephanie twisted the deadbolt. The flimsy door burst inward, knocking her to the ground. Andy scampered in, closed the door behind him and set the broken bolt. "Where's your man?" he smiled, hitching up his bikini shorts.

Stephanie wriggled backwards in a desperate bid to escape. Al reached down from behind and grabbed a fistful of her long blond hair and jerked her to her feet. Only a slight whimper slipped from her lips. "This vitch say I not real man. Time real man teach you thing or two."

Stephanie's adrenaline rocketed; then her mind kicked in. "My friend will be back here any second," she warned, her nostrils flaring in a mixture of rage and dread.

"Andy," yelled the louse of a neighbor, "turn on stereo with good

rock and roll. Make loud so nobody hear screams.” Andy cranked up the music as Al jerked Stephanie’s face up close to his. “*Real men* always make vomans scream. Here, I show you.” He reached out and grabbed at Stephanie’s blouse. In turn, she reached out and dug her nails deep into the wretch’s face.

With a violent back-handed clout Stephanie was knocked to the floor. Andy, his hormonal urges raging, joined in, latching tightly onto the woman’s wrists and pinning her to the floor. With Al holding her by the ankles, the two hulking men made her desperate struggle seem futile.

Just as the gold Saturn pulled up the driveway, Joan stomped out from her back door. In a tattered, gaping robe and dingy slippers, she marched out to her car, picked up a baseball bat from behind the seat and came toward Maggie. Seeing the wild woman—wigless, sullen-faced, completely determined—Maggie fought the panicky chill that ran up her arms. She reached over and locked her door, then rummaged through her purse for the small canister of pepper mace she kept for just such occasions.

The woman marched right past Maggie’s car to where the Camaro stood, reached through the open window and pressed the garage door opener. The door began to groan open. Turning her steely gaze on Maggie, she gave a stern jerk of the head—an invitation for her to follow.

When Maggie climbed from the car, she was greeted by the beat of pounding rock music coming from inside the house. By the time Maggie caught up to the fierce woman, she already had her ear pressed up against the garage door, listening. “They’re up to no good.” She motioned to the mace in Maggie’s hand. “You know how to use that?” Still confused but rapidly grasping the gravity of the moment, Maggie nodded and raised the canister.

Joan twisted the knob and butted the door inward. Maggie followed. An unspeakably grim sight met their eyes. Two wild animals intent on their prey, one sitting on Stephanie’s legs, ripping at her skirt, while Stephanie, thrashing and screaming, clawed and scratched at Andy’s wrists. Joan leapt across the kitchen floor like a savage ninja, swinging the bat with all her might. Her second, boomerang blow found its mark, landing at the base of her husband’s skull. Apparently Al’s head was the one rock solid part of his body, because the sharp whack seemed to not faze the aroused animal in

the least. The third arcing swing, however, caught him flush on the cheekbone, just below the right eye, and Al crumpled to the floor like a fat walrus.

Andy, meanwhile, had jumped to his feet and, while dodging her blows, was attempting to harness the maddened woman. He managed to grab hold of his mother just as she cocked to unleash yet another swipe. But it was Maggie who stepped to bat and delivered a home-run hit of pepper spray, sending Andy sprawling to his knees near his father.

Stephanie sat up and wrapped her arms around her quivering knees. Tears streaking her face, she brought her hands to her chest to secure her blouse. "I knew you'd come," she whispered in shock, her words drowned out by Andy's cries and the unrelenting beat of the music. Maggie knelt and cradled her friend in her arms, vainly trying to curb her own shakes and shivers. "It's over now, you poor thing. It's over."

Joan sat nearby, whimpering in pain. Traces of over-spray from the disabling liquid had splattered back into her face. She groped her way toward the sink and splashed at her searing eyes. Then she stumbled into the living room to squelch the noise coming from the radio. Great sobs came from her chest. Far worse in its effect than the hot javelin of pepper mace, a boundless rage and disgust burned deep within. Her words came out in a raspy monotone. "I should've done that years ago." She sagged at the foot of the couch, panting, blinded by pain and despair. "Hope I killed him. . . . He's nothin' but a . . ." Her salty words were cut short by a violent coughing fit. "Cops'll be here . . . any minute," she sputtered. "I—I knew they was up . . . to no good the—the second they left the house." Another series of retching coughs reduced Joan to a pathetic lump who could barely find the strength to wipe her runny nose and weepy eyes with her robe's frazzled fringe.

The single squad car arrived only seconds before Agents Barnes and Horne pulled to the curb, almost 15 minutes from the original call. Clint eased into the cul-de-sac and circled back out. Climbing from their vehicle, the agents watched him drive away. Barnes made a mental note of the man's face and car's plates. Then, squinting down at the name tag pinned to the crisp blue shirt and drawing his Federal ID from his jacket, he addressed the police officer.

"Officer . . . Fitzgerald, I'm Agent Barnes. You on the job?"

"Domestic. . . . Regulars. Looks like it spilled into the house next door. Can you back me up?"

Halfway up the walk the men paused. A woman's shrill scream

poured from the closed doorway in front. "Lay back down, or I'll open your thick skull like I did your old man!"

In reply came a younger man's defiant voice. "He's going to kill you—if he ain't already dead!"

"No, Andy. He did that a long time ago. There's so many times I wished I *was* dead . . ."

Barnes motioned Horne to take the garage. Fitzgerald tugged at his vest and banged on the screen door. Crouching to the side, he called out, "Police!"

"Come in!" the woman barked. The sound of crashing pots and pans and elevated voices reverberated throughout the house.

Tugging on the screen door's latch, Fitzgerald discovered it was locked.

Simultaneously from inside the garage, Agent Horne cracked the door open and peered into the kitchen, where there stood Joan's own flesh-and-blood, a bat in his hand, shaking it at his mother, who lay on the floor. "You ain't got it in you, you old whore," threatened the son, still reeling from the sting of pepper spray. Turning toward the front door, Andy yelled, "Stay out, cop, or I'll bust the old lady good!"

Horne's pulse went into overdrive as he sized up the situation. He was pretty sure the kid didn't know he was there. Did protocol allow him to enter and take out the guy? Or should he stay put for the moment?

"Andy, is that you?" Fitzgerald yelled through the screen.

"I ain't kiddin'," Andy snarled. "You stay out or I'll bust her good!"

"Andy, it's Officer Fitzgerald. You've got to calm down now and not do anything to make the situation worse."

Andy let a string of profanities slide off his tongue. Then he cursed his mother, blaming her for the puddle of blood his old man was lying in.

Fitzgerald appealed to the kid's sense of logic. "If the old man's hurt, don't you think we better get an ambulance on the way?"

"Yeah, do that. Get an ambulance before he bleeds to death." Through the pain and blurred vision, Andy looked away from his mother, trying to focus on the pitiful sight of his old man, lying face down on the floor.

Fitzgerald leaned to the mike on his shoulder, summoning both back up and an ambulance. Horne seized the split second distraction and burst through the kitchen door, his gun aimed at Andy's chest. "FBI!"

he yelled. "Drop the bat and lay down on the floor!"

Andy wheeled on the balls of his feet, his foggy eyes staring down the barrel of a new Glock-23.

"Don't shoot!" he begged, dropping the bat and cowering to the floor. "We didn't do nothin'. We was just teasin' her, is all."

Backing up Fitzgerald from on the porch, Barnes listened to the new voice from inside the house. "That's my partner." Both men tore at the screen, wrenching the door open.

By now Joan had raised herself to her feet and slogged into the kitchen. Amid all the noise and confusion, she again snatched up the bat. Horne called out. The bat came down with a crack. Andy screamed in pain and grabbed at his limp arm. A shot rang out, and the bat fell from Joan's hand, bounced end-to-end on the floor and rolled to a stop at the base of the cupboards. Barnes and Fitzgerald, having entered the scene, bulldozed Andy into the wall and down onto his stomach. Despite a broken arm, they cinched the cuffs up tight. Then they attended to the gaping wound in Joan's arm.

Down the hall in the bedroom, a chair propped up against the door, Stephanie and Maggie huddled against the wall of clothing in the closet. The screams, the fighting, the gun shot—it sounded like the house was being torn apart. A minute later there came a loud knock at the barricaded door. "It's over, ladies. I'm Federal Agent Barnes. You can come out now. Everything's secured."

Maggie helped Stephanie to her feet and led her to the bed before unblocking the door. Stephanie collapsed sideways on the mattress, arms drawn to her chest and knees to her stomach, a mother protecting her unborn children. The trembling, the shock, the harrowing impact of what she'd witnessed would not go away.

"Shh, shh," Maggie soothed, brushing a clump of tear-soaked hair from the growing bruise on the girl's cheek. "I'm here; everything's safe now."

Barnes, still following the draconian rules of the department, brandished his identification and cautiously kept his distance as he spoke. "Are you hurt?"

"Mostly traumatized," Maggie replied, continuing to stroke Stephanie's hair. She stepped a bit closer to the agent and whispered, "She's the poor girl they were after."

"Two more ambulances are on the way. We need to get her to the hospital for an examination. . . ." Barnes's eyes narrowed. "Was she raped?"

It was never an easy question to ask.

Maggie shook her head. “No, thank goodness. That brave little lady next door stopped them.”

“I have several questions . . .” Barnes hesitated. “—but they can wait.” He bent over the prone figure, speaking softly. “Mrs. Wilson, I need to look around. Is that okay?” A terse nod sent Barnes out of the room.

The ambulances arrived, along with the brass from the Las Vegas PD, a female agent, and one of the Bureau’s forensics special agents.

Three hours later, Stephanie and Maggie were sitting in the office of the FBI to be interviewed. The forensics expert had confirmed that the blood from Mitch’s driveway matched that of Agent Mike Hale. And Ritter? Still stubbornly closed-mouthed, he was resting in a Federal cell two floors down. There he lay, waiting for his answer to a 50 thousand dollar question.

All the evidence pointed to an open-and-shut case. Agent Barnes had called the SAC’s office to request a Federal warrant be issued for the arrest of Mitchell Ray Wilson for the suspected murder of Federal Agent Mike Hale.

It was a killer migraine that plagued Logan Field, 52-year-old Special Agent in Charge of the Las Vegas district. After swallowing the pill with a glass of water, he slumped at his desk, eyes closed, his knuckles pummeling his temples. The day’s crazy events—coupled with the still-missing agent—rested like anvils on his pounding brain. Angling the heel of his hand, he massaged at his shiny forehead, then ran his fingers across his thinning, short-cropped stand of salt-and-pepper hair and down his tight neck. The muscles that connected at the base of his skull seemed to be the source of the throbbing.

Finally letting go of the nape of his neck, Field muttered, “So, this Ritter guy won’t give it up without money?”

Barnes shook his head. “He’s ready to lawyer up.”

“And you think Hale’s dead and that this Mitchell Wilson is to blame?”

Barnes nodded. “No doubt, he’s involved.”

“His wife willing to talk?”

“I don’t know. Maybe if we get enough on him, she’ll decide to give him up.”

“What are the chances Mr. Ritter can post bail on assault charges?”

“Virtually none. He’s a vagrant. He’s got nothing to lose, everything to gain.”

Field slid his wire-rim glasses down his nose, stuck a finger in the corner of his tired, bloodshot left eye, and pushed. “I’ll give you one day. If you find Hale’s body, we’ll tell Mr. Ritter to take a hike. Otherwise, for the family’s sake, you pay the price.” Field inched the drooping glasses back up onto the bridge of his nose. “I haven’t lost an agent in nine years. I was hoping to retire that way.”

Barnes nodded. “I know, sir.”

As Barnes turned to leave, Fields said, “Oh, one more thing. Have this Mitchell Wilson arraigned on assault, not murder. And leave Hale’s name out of the court. We don’t need the media on this thing yet.” He drew the glasses from his face and squeezed his eyes shut. “Have you talked to Agent Hale’s contact?”

Barnes shook his head and issued a clicking sound with his cheeks. “He never would disclose the name—said it was too risky.”

“Find him. Maybe he can shed some light on this whole thing. Call Salt Lake and get their office on it as well.” He replaced the glasses on his nose. “Three months to go,” he lamented, “and I lose a borrowed man from Utah. Issue the warrant. Do whatever it takes to find Wilson.”

THIRTY-TWO

TOMMY'S HAIR EMPORIUM was situated off Charleston near 10th Street, sandwiched between Quality Tattoo and Roxane's Exotic Gifts & Chapel of Love. Its windows, like those of every other business on the street, were protected by heavy metal bars. In that part of town, protection meant the difference between staying in business and going belly up.

Sound lurked in the doorway of the hair salon, while Greg waited in the Yellow Cab out front, staring at the leather straps and chains dangling from the life-size, almost nude cardboard model in the window of the neighboring business. Bold block letters beneath the tantalizing cutout advertised "Roxane's Weekly Special." His mind harkened back to the first time he'd ever considered cheating on his wife. In fact, his eyes had begun to stray months earlier, captured in the web of pornography. His clergy had offered council on porn's dangers, how it eventually destroys self-esteem, relationships, careers . . . but he hadn't listened. Month after month of visits to increasingly explicit and exotic web sites soon lost its luster. Before he knew what had hit him, the most common, everyday incident could turn his thoughts inside out; the most innocent notion could exist side by side in his head with the most vile fantasy, each mingling with the other in a swirling, dark pool. Even at the time, he'd marveled at the remarkable swiftness of the transformation. And soon he discovered that the love and tenderness he felt in his marriage had slipped, replaced by the lure of an illicit, flesh-and-blood relationship with another woman.

Sound called from the doorway. "She's almost finished." His eyes continued to twitch nervously back and forth, darting from the cab to the salon and out to the street.

Greg checked his wristwatch, now back where it belonged. In fact, a lot of things were finally back to normal. While staying at the T-bird, he'd been restored to the world of bathing, using deodorant, shaving,

intentionally “dressing down,” once again enjoying all the simple pleasures. Now there he sat, victim of a fresh, too-short haircut, dressed in a new pair of dark green chinos and a casual golf shirt, looking like a businessman on his day off rather than the homeless bum he’d been only the day before. Fingering the watch, he couldn’t help thinking about Reverend Keller returning the gift, while at the same time tricking him into admitting to himself that he needed help if he hoped to resolve the issues of his failed marriage.

He peered out to where Sound stood. Finally he’d waited long enough. “We’re going to be late,” he called out as he opened the door and climbed from the cab.

Sound shrieked and danced from the shop, his arms waving in the air like an excited school girl’s. “Wait a minute—you’ll ruin the surprise!” he fussed.

Greg peered down the street. On the corner three young black men stood, holding skateboards in their hands. They were chatting with a woman in her early 20s, dressed in tight clothing and wearing ultra-high heels. Distracted by Sound’s squeals of delight, their attention was drawn to the ridiculous scene.

Slightly shamed by the ruckus, Greg slunk back to the partial shelter of the cab, insulating himself from their glares. Then it hit him: he’d been embarrassed by Sound. Here he was, back amongst the living, and he was ashamed. *Had the change somehow influenced his feelings about respect and acceptance of others?* He bowed his head. Sound was his friend, someone who was willing to risk his own life for others, a man who was unafraid to be himself, regardless of the way others saw him.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Sound smiled, resting his hand on Greg’s as he gripped the cab’s door frame. “I just don’t want you to ruin the fun.”

Greg looked down at Sound’s slender fingers, then across the sidewalk at the tall black man who stepped from the salon. Dressed in tight black stretch pants, cut below the knee, a sleeveless, shimmering purple shirt that exposed his midriff halfway up his stomach and a tall pair of black-suede platform dress shoes, he folded at the waist and fluttered his arm in a flourish. “Presenting the lovely Ms. Lambert,” his voice thundered in the manner of a vaudeville act. He stepped aside, continuing to roll his wrist in less pronounced flourishes as if trying to coax someone into the street.

From the shadows of the room appeared Nurse, a southern-belle wild

flower, dressed in a light-blue outfit that fell below her knees and buttoned at the neck. Her stringy, gray hair no longer lay flat against her head. Instead it was precisely gathered into an old-fashioned yet stylish bun at the back of her head. Layers of carefully applied make-up covered years of harsh exposure to the elements, and a small, matching handbag hung at her wrist.

Sound, placing a hand to his mouth, gasped, "Oh my . . ." The words were cut short by a muffle. He turned to see Greg's reaction. "Isn't she the most beautiful thing you ever saw?"

Greg came to his feet as the old woman strolled out onto the sidewalk, reached to her waist and grabbed a large handful of dress. Then she hiked it up and wiggled her hips from side to side. "Mercy be," she groused. "Never did like 'em as a girl and don't think much a' 'em now. An' you two stop starin' like you ain't never seen a woman in a new dress 'fore."

A smile plastered across his face, Greg shook his head and mumbled something to Sound. "Just like an old barn. No matter how nice you paint the outside, if you open the doors and don't get out the pitchfork the inside's still full of the same old crap."

"I heard that," carped Nurse. "I might be half blind but I ain't deaf. 'Sides, what d' *you* know 'bout barns?"

Sound raised his arms in frustration. "I finished my part, now it's up to you, Sunny."

Nurse shuffled across the walk and plowed Greg aside as she dragged herself into the cab and plopped down in the rear seat. "Now let's get the lead out 'fore I go an' change my mind."

Greg slammed the door shut and placed one hand on Sound's shoulder as he led him around the back of the cab. "You did a good job, Sound. A real good job. I don't know what we'd do without you."

Sound took a deep breath and stood a bit straighter. "I watched real close while Tommy fixed her up. I should be able to get her ready every morning."

"Good," said Greg. "Mitch will meet you at the T-Bird by four." He paused and removed a slip of paper from his pocket. "Call us at the doctor's office by five and tell me our new address. Here's the number."

"He found a condo?"

"I sure hope so."

"Me too."

"I'll hear from you by five then?"

“You can count on it. . . .” Sound hesitated. “By the way. You look real nice in the new clothes. . . . And I’m not trying to make a pass at you.”

Greg smiled, opened the door to the cab and said, “You cleanup pretty good yourself. Let’s just hope Cap’n and Ritter look just as sharp.”

He’d already climbed into the rear seat and pulled the door closed, when Sound rapped on the glass, his fretting face peering inside. “Have we heard from Ritter?”

Greg rolled down the window. “Nobody’s seen him.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” Nurse chimed in. “‘At boy’s always had a mind a’ his own. . . .”

“You think he’d turn on us?” Greg asked.

“Don’t think so, but it wouldn’t be a bad thing you watch your back-side a leavin’ the T-bird now, ya’ hear?” Nurse administered her mild scolding while shaking her crooked finger at Sound and blowing air through her loose lips in a soft whistle. Sound agreed and watched the cab pull from the curb, still speculating about what Ritter might do if given the chance.

Indeed, Ritter stood in front of a Federal judge, chained hand and foot, his young court-appointed defense attorney—only 15 minutes familiar with his case—at his side. Two Federal security agents were stationed close at hand.

The judge scrolled up and down the charges through his bifocals as the green lawyer advised his new client. “This is a preliminary hearing,” he whispered. “Just keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking.”

Ritter bristled. “What you thinkin’, mate, I ain’t never been in a bloomin’ courtroom before?”

Annoyed by the murmurings coming from below his bench, the judge looked up over his glasses. “Mr. Ritter, do you know why you’re in my court this afternoon?” he growled.

“Sure do, mate. Popped a guard in the mouth wit’ me broken hand, I did. And wit’ good reason.” He turned smugly and stared over at the prosecuting attorney. “I had important information for the FBI.”

“Oh?” queried the judge, “and what might that information be?”

Ritter opened his mouth to answer, then thought better of it.

“Objection, your honor,” both defender and prosecutor said in uni-

son.

The judge looked back and forth between the lawyers, as if something was awry. The file was distinctly vague. The man had assaulted a Federal agent early in the morning, yet hadn't been booked into Federal lockup until late in the afternoon.

"Approach the bench, counsel." Both came forward, staring up apprehensively at the seasoned magistrate. "What's going on here?" he asked, holding his hand over the microphone. "We've got the FBI's best prosecutor assigned to keep this man behind bars, and the court's newest defender trying to keep him from getting fried." The judge stole a brief glance at the appointed prosecution.

"Nothing's going on Your Honor," he said. "This is just a preliminary hearing, not a trial. The man admitted to assaulting the security guard. All we need to do is decide bail."

A hint of a scoff erupted from the judge's lips. "I'm aware of the protocol in my own courtroom, counsel." He turned from the more seasoned attorney to the less. "And why did you object?"

"Your Honor, I've barely had fifteen minutes to examine this case, and you're asking questions that could convict my client before I've had time to get answers."

The judge nodded. "It appears to me the man has something he wants to say. I think the court will allow him to say it. Take your seats." Both men returned to their places. "Mr. Ritter, you may continue."

Ritter gave the prosecutor his patented 'told you so!' smirk. "Like I was sayin', your Honor, I had a fine good reason t' pop 'im." Ritter paused to get every mile out of the drop of fuel for which he was about to pay. "The bloke woke me from a fine dream," Ritter continued. "See, this beautiful blonde was kissin' on me face. . ."

"Enough!" The judge came to his feet. Here in a court of law, he and two other highly educated men had been made to look foolish—by an uneducated man, no less, a smelly tramp with a smug grin. "The court finds reason to bind this man over for trial. Do you have a recommendation for bail?" He turned to the prosecutor.

"Fifty-thousand dollars, your Honor. We feel . . ."

The judge rapped his mallet on the bench. "Bail's set at fifty-thousand. Next case."

As he was led from the courtroom, Ritter, still gloating, peered over his shoulder at the prosecutor. They both knew the information he had kept

secret couldn't remain hidden forever. And Ritter alone knew the aces he kept up his sleeve were about to up the ante.

"I'm sorry to keep you so long, Mrs. Wilson." Barnes stepped back into the box-like interview room, Horne close in tow. "We're almost finished. We just have a few more questions. Are you feeling better?" Stephanie nodded. "Can I get you a coffee or soda or something?"

"No, I just want to go home."

"This shouldn't take much longer, but it's very personal. Are you sure you want Mrs. Champion to stay with you?"

"Yes." Stephanie gave a reaffirming squeeze to the motherly hand holding her own.

"Mrs. Wilson," Barnes continued, taking a notepad from his pocket and sliding out a chair. "Do you know where your husband is?"

Stephanie looked at Maggie, then back at Barnes. "I think he's in St. Louis at a vocational competition."

"Have you ever heard of a man named Clint Thurston?"

"No."

"How about a Vincent Domenico?"

"No."

"Do you know Mike Hutchings?"

"Sure. He's Mitch's boss."

"He's also a Federal agent, assigned to our office from Utah, involved in a case that has to do with stolen antique cars."

Stephanie's eyes shot back and forth between the two agents, trying to decide if the whole thing was some sort of rotten prank. "What does this have to do with Mitch?"

"We think Mitch is involved. It's very important we find him as soon as possible. Are you sure he's in St. Louis?"

Stephanie lowered her head and pulled her hair back with her hands. "I tried to call his hotel. He didn't check in."

"We know. He didn't get on the flight, either."

Stephanie shook her head. "Are you implying Mitch has been stealing cars? Because if you are, I can prove he's been fixing up those cars himself . . ."

"No, not at all. As a matter of fact we think one of *his* cars was stolen." Barnes motioned toward Horne, who opened the door and waited while someone wheeled a small television and video player into the room and

plugged it into the wall. Barnes continued, "This is our video surveillance from Mike's shop on Friday evening. We've had our department put in captions because at times it's hard to hear what they're saying."

The screen went to static, then the tape whirled into motion. The image was of inside Mike's shop. Stephanie had been there once or twice to see what her husband was working on. Mike was talking on a cell phone, but the audio was mute. Then it came on. "*He's already had his car stolen . . .*" The sound went off again. The tape had obviously been edited. The door to the shop opened and Mitch sauntered in. Mike looked toward the door and said, "*Hey, I'll talk to you later. Mitch just walked in.*"

"*I didn't know you had a cell phone,*" Mitch said.

"*Just got it.*"

"*Cool. Do you mind if I work on my wife's car for a minute?*"

"*No problem. How'd it go with the GTO?*"

At this point, Mitch paused, blinked hard and swallowed. "*Not so good.*" He turned toward the bay door.

"*What happened?*"

"*The sucker ripped me off. Planned it for several days.*" Mitch's back still toward the camera, the words appeared across the screen. "*The worst part is, I think Bino set me up.*"

"*How's that?*"

Mitch turned slowly. "*Claimed he told Janice to tell me not to let him take it. She says it was the other way around.*"

"*Look, kid, you're dealing with some rough men. Did you call the cops?*"

"*No. The car was running illegal plates.*"

"*Doesn't matter. They can still take down a report.*"

"*I've got to see Janice. She knows more about him than anybody else.*"

"*You want some help? I might make a better snoop than a body man.*"

Horne hit the stop button on the video player and turned off the television. "Have you seen Mitch's GTO the last few days?"

"No . . . but Mitch would have told me about all this," she replied, a tad surly. "And you're only showing bits and pieces of the tape. How do I know that what you're showing isn't taken out of context?"

Barnes cocked his head. "You saw his face. You tell me, was it for real?"

Stephanie remained tight-lipped.

"We have more," Horne said as he picked up a legal-size pad from the television cart. "Last Thursday night Mitch was involved in an armed robbery. This is a composite drawing from a witness." He dropped a computer sketch of Mitch on the table. "A description of the getaway car matches the car in your garage—a car with stolen plates."

"Mitch would never rob anybody."

"Mrs. Wilson, are you aware that your husband has a criminal record?"

"Yes, but . . ." Stephanie bit her lip and turned to Maggie. "Maybe I need an attorney."

Barnes lifted a hand. "Mrs. Wilson, you're not being charged with anything. However, Mitch *will* need a good attorney—unless he can explain several of his actions. Please hear me out. We need your help. A Federal warrant's been issued for the arrest of your husband." Horne slid a copy of the warrant in front of the woman.

Stephanie skimmed through the charges. "Suspected Murder? . . ." Once again her lips tightened in concern, but she kept her composure. Her tears had all been spent earlier in the day. Finally she said, "I can't listen to any more of this. This isn't the Mitch I know; this can't all be happening. . . ."

"I know this is hard, Mrs. Wilson, but there's more, please . . ."

"No, no." She stood. "We need to talk about this later. I can't listen to anymore."

Barnes' voice became more insistent. "You have to listen to me. Someone may be after you . . ."

Stephanie edged toward the door. "No!" she sobbed, a tearless cry as if her heart had burst. "I c-can't . . ." She fled from the room and down the hallway.

Maggie also stood to leave, but Barnes blocked her exit. "We'll send a unit to watch your place tonight. Will you bring her back in the morning?"

"If she'll come." Maggie eased Barnes to the side and went to catch up with her friend.

Nurse's body had become one rigid, bony bundle of nerves. Her foot twitching, her knobby knuckles bone-white, she sat coiled in Dr. Clark's examination chair. The ophthalmologist smiled reassuringly.

“Mrs. Lambert, this is a pretty simple procedure. We do it a half-dozen times each day.”

Brooding like a rankled robot, Nurse shot back, “I ain’t never had no doctor look in my eyes ‘fore.”

The doctor lowered his overhead light and rolled back in his chair. “It wasn’t so bad then, was it?”

“You finished—‘at’s it?”

“I’ve seen enough to know you’ve gone without your sight too long. The procedure to make you see again takes about forty minutes per eye. It’s almost painless, and in a few days you’ll be seeing like you did ten or fifteen years ago. You may not even need glasses when we’re finished.”

“You gotta cut my eyes?”

“We use an ultrasound to break up the deposits, then we suck out the broken pieces and sew on a new lens.”

“Doc,” pressed Nurse, “you’s been avoidin’ my question. You’ll be puttin’ a knife in my eyes, won’t you?”

Doctor Clark glanced over at Greg, sitting quietly against the wall, then back at Nurse. “Yes,” he answered, a deliberateness to his voice, “I’ll need to cut the old lens off to remove the cataract.”

“Will I be a’sleepin’ or awake while’s this whole thing’s goin’ on?”

“You’ll be awake. We’ll put some drops in your eyes to deaden the pain.”

A series of grumblings came from her mouth. “Feel like an ol’ heifer ten months pregnant . . . hurt if I do, more if I don’t . . .”

“I beg your pardon?” Dr. Clark sat staring at the strange old woman, clearly puzzled.

Nurse stared back. “You best stop flappin’ your gums and get after it then, ‘fore I go an’ change my mind.”

Realizing the patient had given permission to proceed, Dr. Clark left the room to instruct his staff to prepare for surgery. Greg walked over and gave Nurse’s arm a pat, her hands still clutching tightly the arms of the chair.

Her cloudy eyes rested on her friend. She’d never felt so vulnerable, so utterly helpless. “What if somethin’ goes wrong an’ I never see again? Been one a’ my nightmares since th’ first day I knew I was losin’ my sight.”

Greg’s hand kept up its calming caress. “Dr. Clark’s done hundreds of these procedures.”

“But what if somethin’ happens . . .”

“Well. . . since we’ve already slept together, I guess I’d have to marry you. I’d be your eyes, and we’d live happily ever after, you holding onto my arm wherever we went.”

Nurse lifted one skeletal hand and rested it on the younger man’s, the corners of her mouth creasing into a soft smile. “That’s a fine offer, Sunny. But there’s only one thing wrong. Couldn’t never marry a man still carryin’ a flame for ‘nother woman.” The room took on an awkward silence, as both reflected on their own weighty problems. “One thing you better do since you got me in this mess,” Nurse finally added. “Sit with me an’ hold my hand ‘til it’s over.”

Greg’s tender smile, which he riveted directly in front of the old woman’s weary eyes, conveyed much more than mere words. “I won’t leave you—I promise.”

THIRTY-THREE

THE WINDOWS OF THE three-bedroom, unfurnished apartment on the fourth floor looked out over the roof-tops of the ethnically mixed, lower-middle-class neighborhood. Farther to the southwest, one could see the towering Las Vegas Hilton rising above the convention center. Mitch stood on the small balcony, gazing out on the part of town where Stephanie worked. *Why hasn't she come back from lunch?* Kirsten had been of absolutely no help, and no one had answered at Maggie's house.

"Come on, Lightnin', we better get back," Cap'n insisted. "Sound'll be waitin' at the T-bird."

Mitch stepped inside and glided the balcony door shut. He marveled at the changes that had come over the big black man. Nearly clean-shaven, he wore a pair of coveralls—that looked like they'd been sewn by Omar the tentmaker—over a white T-shirt that bulged at the biceps. Despite his cleaned-up appearance, however, he still had on the same old pair of combat boots. "Thanks but no thanks," is all he'd say when asked if he wanted a new pair. The skin on his face appeared smooth and tender from the years of cover the old beard had offered. A small, thin, well trimmed grey goatee now made a light shadow across his jaw and chin. His bushy eyebrows had been trimmed, and with the nose- and ear-hair removed, he actually looked quite normal—even ten years younger.

The worry etched in Mitch's face was evident. "I've got to find her."

"I know, but we better wait for orders from Nurse or Sunny. You can't be wanderin' around town, not with Mr. Vinnie out lookin' for you."

"I can't stand around waiting, either," replied Mitch. "You go back to the T-bird without me. I'll help Smitty shave and meet you back here later tonight, after I find her."

Smitty poked his mop-haired head from the bathroom door down

the hall and shook it defiantly. Cap'n smiled, then said, "I'll agree on one condition: You don't leave 'til Smitty's bathed and dressed in his new clothes."

A worried smile crossed Mitch's face. "Deal."

Cap'n extended his thick hand as a gesture of understanding and wrapped his stout fingers around Mitch's firm yet more slender grip. "Deal," Cap'n smiled. "Smitty's always had some sort of fear of water. Unless you're a stronger man than me, you'll still be here when I get back." Cap'n went out the door.

At the click of the lock, Smitty's face again appeared from down the hall, staring at Mitch. The expression signaled genuine dread, as if he'd lock himself in the bathroom forever if anyone even mentioned the 'B-word.'

"It's a good thing this place came with a fridge," Mitch said in a loud voice as he walked across the living room and into the kitchen. "We won't be eating at any soup kitchens for a while. Not until we take care of Mr. Vinnie, that is." He pulled himself up on the countertop. "I wonder what Mr. Vinnie will do if he gets his hands on my wife . . ."

That brought Smitty creeping out of the bathroom. Down the hallway he came, worming up next to the refrigerator, nearly out of sight, to listen.

"Her name's Stephanie," Mitch carried on, a trace of sadness in his voice. "She's been trying to choose baby names. Did I tell you she's pregnant with twins? . . ." He raised his bowed head enough to see Smitty—barely visible through the space between the fridge and the wall—shake his head no. "I saw these tiny x-rays called sonograms the other day. The doc thinks they're a boy and a girl." A sheepish smile wrinkled Mitch's forehead. "I asked if they were identical. . . . Imagine that, a boy and a girl *identical*." The vision of Stephanie sitting at the kitchen table, drawing a strand of long blond hair up behind her ear, flashed through his thoughts. *Where was she? Was he too late?*

The sound of running water roused Mitch from his daydream. He hopped from the counter and peered down the hallway toward the bathroom. Smitty's dirty clothes were strewn along the floor in three-foot intervals. The last piece, a pair of grimy-gray briefs, lay halfway outside the open doorway.

Mitch wagged his head and pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. With hardly any effort at all he'd just co-

erced a man who was deathly frightened of soap and water into taking a bath. However he'd done it, it was justified. Stephanie needed him *now*, not in an hour or two. He had to find her, or at the very least call and remind her he loved her. And it might be handy having the little lock-pick along, in case they needed to gain access to Maggie's house.

The contrast between the sleek red Ferrari and the rusted-out relic of a pump in front of the practically abandoned Husky station was too stark for words. Equally distinct were the two men inside the scratched-glass pay booth. The well-dressed one stood screaming obscenities and hurling accusations at his listener. The other, settled calmly behind his desk, rolled the excess ash from the tip of his cigarette. There was a graphic symmetry to the entire scene, a meeting of opposites, the perfect blend of self-styled "grace" and ugly "gauche."

From time to time the pay booth literally shook from the one man's seething jolts and jabs. Finally, after what seemed like an avalanche of thundering threats had rained down on him, the calm one got to his feet, pinched the short butt of the nearly smoked cigarette between his thumb and middle finger, and casually flicked it at the other. The trailing ash and sparks lingered for only a moment, then dropped at their feet and died.

Vinnie blinked in disbelief as Bino looked him square in the eye, mentally recording what in all likelihood would be the final seconds of his miserable life. The smoldering butt had struck headlong on Vinnie's shirt collar, then—as if a camera were clicking at each instant, recording the surreal act for all eternity—had taken a slow-motion tumble down the lapel of his silk suit and landed on the floor, its coiled smoke continuing to rise in the foul, sultry air.

Both men stared down at the ground as Vinnie placed the toe of his size-10 Gucci on the butt and crushed out the last of its life. Then, in a well-oiled maneuver, he wrested the firearm from inside his jacket and drew the hammer back. With cold steel pressed up against his temple, a remote shiver ran up Bino's spine. Then the death sentence was spoken: "Consider your debt paid in full."

Bino, remarkably calm, closed his eyes to await his fate. "And yours," he whispered, "is just beginning."

Vinnie, suddenly sensing he was in the center of a large spotlight, glared out the window. A busy Rancho Drive was too public a place

for snuffing out a life—even if it was just Bino. Jamming the gun back in its holster, he decided to take a different tack. “Didn’t Jimmy once tell me you have a daughter?” he said, his stony disposition returning.

Bino’s eyes flew open. His voice came in jagged, halfway convincing cries. “Jimmy was a . . . a liar!”

“And you’re a coward—always have been. ‘Sides, joinin’ Mike would only put you out of your misery. I’m gonna let you twist in the wind a while longer.” Vinnie scanned the street again before continuing. “To-day you’re ready to die, maybe be a hero, or maybe restore honor to the family name—that’s my bet.” With a sudden wide sweep of his arms, the wise guy cleared the three eye-level shelves of their carefully arranged motor oil jugs, cigarettes and car fresheners, scattering the contents across the floor and desk. As he did so, a small video camera clattered down onto the dirty tile. On its second bounce, its cartridge panel popped open, spewing out a small video tape.

Bino stared down at the tape, then up at the mad man’s cold smile. Vinnie let out a contented grunt, then leaned over, picked up the tape and dropped it in his pocket. “Now where was we before you so rudely flung your garbage in my face?” He brushed a stubborn ash from his lapel and realigned his jacket sleeves. “Oh, I remember now. You was volunteerin’ your services to find the kid and his pretty little wife for me—for the which I’ll forget about the daughter you don’t got, the Fed you lined me up with, and the cleaning bill for my suit.”

In slow surrender, Bino slumped back into his chair and drew the remaining filtered cigarette from his shirt pocket. “What do . . . you want?” he asked, flicking open his lighter.

“The kid’s wife was seen with an older woman about noon. Here’s the plate number of her car.” He dropped a scrap of paper on the desk. “You got an hour to call me with the address.” Vinnie slid the booth door open, then paused, his back still turned. “An’ if you ever do anything like that again, I’ll blow your knee cap off.”

Maggie pulled under the single-car carport at the side of her modest home and turned off the ignition. Long shadows from the evening sun stretched down the driveway. Only the sound of birds chirping was heard on the quiet street. Gazing into the rearview mirror, she watched the tan sedan, which had followed them from the Federal building, pull up in front of the house.

"Mitch lied to me," grumbled Stephanie, finally breaking the silence. "He's been lying to me all along, from the very beginning. He probably wasn't an innocent bystander in the robbery back in high school—and now this. . . ." The expectant mother bent over and put her face in her hands.

Maggie reached out and stroked Stephanie's back. "Do you really believe that?"

"Yes . . . no. . . . I don't know anymore," she whimpered. "He's been lying to me about going to church, and . . . about going to the airport, and . . . who knows about what else. . . . Now he's wanted for murder. What am I supposed to believe?" She lifted her head and wiped her crimson nose with a crumpled tissue. "Wh-what do you think?"

"Well, from my experience," Maggie began, resting her mature, slender hand on the younger woman's arm, "when a man has given his heart to the woman he loves, and she has given her heart to him—I mean when they've really given their hearts away—you can look right into each other's soul and know what the other person is feeling. Sometimes it takes years of practice, other times only a few months. From what I know of you and Mitch, you've already given one another that kind of love. Sure, you may still need some practice at understanding how the other is feeling, but the love is there."

"Do you really think so?"

"Can you ever imagine yourself being without Mitch?"

Stephanie's distant gaze came to rest on a point beyond the windshield, far out toward the setting sun. Finally she shook her head. "I can't."

"What if he was convicted of a serious crime?"

Turning to face the older woman, Stephanie's mind flashed frame by frame through a hundred painful memories, most revolving around her own mother's slanderous words. She could hear them now in her mind. "*He's a boy from a junkyard, Stephanie. He'll never amount to anything. . . . Is he really guilty? . . . How do you know he's innocent? . . . Did he lie, or is this just a wild misunderstanding? . . .*" Then Stephanie asked a question of her own, one only she could answer: "*Is Mitch capable of murder?*"

"I don't think so," she said at last, "but I just don't know."

"Maybe that's what you need to decide before we go back and hear the rest of the evidence. Look inside your heart, and then inside his. You'll find the answer." Maggie gave Stephanie's arm a final squeeze

and said, “Now, we started out for lunch almost eight hours ago. You said you were starving then, by now I’ll bet you and those babies are famished.”

Stephanie let out a spent sigh. “Now that you mention it, I am.”

“Well let’s go inside and see what we can throw together.” Maggie began to reach for the door.

Stephanie cleared her throat. “Maggie, thank you. . . . I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Then, despite the river of tears she’d cried during the day, her eyes welled to overflowing.

Maggie leaned back across the seat and gave the younger woman a gentle hug, her own eyes filled with love and compassion. “Oh, you sweet girl. I wouldn’t dream of letting you go through this alone.”

Only three short miles from Maggie’s home, Mitch and Smitty stood shoulder to shoulder in front of a bathroom mirror. Staring at their reflections, Mitch asked, “Don’t you know how to shave?”

Smitty shook his head. He’d been standing at the sink, dressed in his new clothes, for at least five minutes, the razor and can of shaving cream held limply in his hands.

“Didn’t you ever watch your dad shave?”

Smitty’s head again wagged side to side. Then he went into a routine of pretending to use an electric razor.

Mitch, his mind focused on Stephanie, hurriedly asked, “Would you like me to teach you?”

Listlessly glancing up and down between the can and razor in his hand and his scraggly image in the mirror, the mute locksmith struggled to make up his mind. Tongue-tied since birth, Smitty, now in his late 40s, stared past the stringy beard, past the rotting teeth and long hair. Within seconds, the lingering image staring back at him in the mirror was that of his own father.

Clarence Webber, Smitty’s real name, was large of head. Breach at birth, he was the first child born to a young mother. It was before the days of modern technology, in a time when it was not uncommon for both mother and child to die during childbirth, especially in a small, Midwest county hospital. And indeed, according to his stepmother and half siblings who lived in the same tiny house, he would have been “better off dead, like her.”

Unable to speak, write or read, Clarence could never fully communicate his feelings to the one person who loved him: his father. Through-

out his unhappy childhood, nearly all others had been most unkind. His stepmother had always expressed a special hatred towards him. Even as an infant he could remember the desperate feelings of helplessness, of not being able to take a breath as she held his head under the bath water. Consciously, he couldn't remember the near drownings at her hand, only the painful awareness of being hated. For years he kept his feelings under wraps. They only surfaced when he was around water—of any sort—or when he was confined to any small space. But after a time those repressed feelings became magnified a hundredfold, and he began to act out in more and more strange ways.

Up until his father's sudden death, since Clarence was four years old, he'd worked constantly at the man's side. At first, traipsing along-side the strapping young man as he went about his work as a locksmith was merely an act of self preservation. But later, as the "dumb Webber child" honed the same talents his dad owned, it became an accomplishment no one had thought possible of the boy. It wasn't long after his father's passing that his stepmother sold the family business, and Smitty became a casualty of the homeless forgotten. Nurse, in her goodness, had taken him in and nurtured and taught the boy the basic survival skills of the street.

Now Smitty reached out to touch the face in the mirror, as if greeting a long-lost friend. Then he quickly retracted his fingers from the cold, lifeless glass. Thrusting the razor in front of Mitch, he nodded a confirming yes.

Mitch squirted a blob of cream in his own hand and waited for Smitty to do likewise. Then, like a father-and-son team, he walked him through each simple step.

When five long minutes had passed, the mirror reflected back two clean-shaven faces, one unspotted yet still tense, the other smiling from one ear clear across to the other, his face covered with nicks and bits of bloody tissue.

"You clean up pretty good, Smitty," Mitch said, giving him a slap on the back. "All you need now is a haircut and a trip to the dentist."

At mention of the word 'dentist,' Smitty's smile faded, followed by a head shake.

"Okay, okay. The haircut can wait 'til tomorrow and the dentist is off limits forever. Now, let's go find my wife."

Smitty hunched over, slapped his hand on the small leather fanny pack clipped to his waist—carrying the tools of his trade—and lit out for the door like he was late for supper.

At eight-thirty, almost an hour and ten minutes after Vinnie's visit, Bino slid the old rotary dial phone over near the ashtray. With his stained index finger he slowly dialed the number and waited. "Hello, Sis. . . . No, just a little . . . tired's all. . . . I know, I know. . . . Look, I was wondering . . . if you'd do me . . . a little favor. This lady . . . came in and . . . bought gas a few minutes . . . ago. A nice woman . . . well dressed. But she . . . left without paying. . . . No, she's not . . . the type. I just wanted to . . . give her a call. . . . I'm sure she'll come . . . back and pay without . . . the embarrassment . . . of some officer . . . knocking on her door. . . . I know you're not. . . . No, I . . . shouldn't have asked. . . . Never mind. . . . I'll just call the cops."

Bino paused a moment, then replied, "Are you sure?" He picked up Vinnie's scrap of paper and read off Maggie's plate number. In a few seconds he was scribbling her address on the same slip. "Thanks, Sis . . . I owe you one. . . . Tell the boys hi . . . from their uncle Bernalillo. . . . Love you, too."

Ten minutes later up on the 13th floor of Three Queens, Vinnie summoned Frankie from the main lobby, where he'd been keeping an eye on the teller booth. The wise guy paced restlessly across the white carpet, waiting for the elevator to arrive. As soon as the doors opened and Frankie's face appeared, Vinnie launched into his orders. "Go check this place out." He crushed a slip of paper containing Maggie's address in the big ox's palm. "Now don't go off doin' somethin' stupid. Just call me when you get there."

"Okay, Vinnie. Anything else you want?"

"If I give you more than one instruction at a time you'll screw it up just like you . . ." Vinnie lit into the unfortunate brute with a volley of insults, ending with, ". . . just call me after you check it out!"

"Sure thing, Vinnie." Frankie trudged back into the elevator and pressed the button. The doors had almost closed when Vinnie crammed his foot between them. Stepping into the elevator, he glared up into Frankie's face. "Don't screw this up," he sneered, "or I ship you back to your ol' man in a trunk. I want the girl unhurt and alive."

"Okay, okay, I got it, Vinnie."

The two-bit gangster stepped from the elevator and the doors closed. "Mr. Domenico," his phone beeped.

A frustrated look on his face, Vinnie marched over to his desk and pressed the intercom. "I thought I told you not to bother me . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir . . . but I have a collect call from a man named Lawrence Ritter," the secretary stammered. "It's the tenth time he's called. Should I, uh, take a message?"

"What's he want?"

"I don't know, sir. I haven't accepted the charges."

Vinnie swore under his breath and slouched down into his white leather chair. "Put him through." Patience not being one of his virtues, when the phone rang Vinnie snatched up the receiver and roared, "Yeah, wha'd'ya' want?"

"Evenin', mate. It was right fine a' you to take me call, it was," the voice rambled. "You won't regret it, for sure."

"Who is this?" Vinnie shouted.

"Me mum, who's been bad off an' in the hospital the last few years, calls me Lawrence; me friends call me Ritter."

"And I don't have time for games and our conversation's over." He began to hang up.

"Mitch Wilson!" Ritter yelled from the other end of the line.

Vinnie returned the phone to his ear. "What?"

"Mitch Wilson, a right cheeky devil. Got a friend a' his hid away, I do. The bloke's smellin' right sod now. Poor twit had his fluids leakin' out on the trunk floor. Too bad about the picnic and barbeque. Lost the meat now, didn't we?"

Vinnie went on the attack. "I don't know what you're tryin' to pull here . . ." Then his threats suddenly altered course to telling Ritter exactly where he could shove the prank call.

"Ain't no prank, mate," answered Ritter. "See, they got me locked in the Federal suite. Can't be too careful these days. Now I need a good attorney and fifty-grand in bail to bring the meat to your flat, I do, where we can chat about me lotto face to face." Ritter hung up the phone and smiled as he thought, *I hope the Jersey-accented hard guy isn't so lame he can't figure out what I been tryin' to tell him.*

He'd placed his call now, and knew it had been recorded—probably even listened in on. But it didn't matter. By the time the information made it back to anyone who knew what he'd been talking about, it'd be too late.

In his 13th-floor suite, Vinnie's mind sorted through the jumble of British

slang. Slowly he placed the phone into its cradle. Then he yanked it back up to his ear. "Get my attorney on the line!"

THIRTY-FOUR

WITH NOT A SINGLE STICK of furniture in the room, Nurse plunked herself down on the floor. She leaned her head back against the wall, legs crossed like an old Indian chief, her slip hiked up to her garter belt beneath her new dress. With both eyes patched, her mood was less than cheerful. “You tol’ ‘em he could go,” she chided, “if’n Smitty took a bath?”

Cap’n scratched his head. “I’m sorry. Didn’t think he was strong ‘nough to force him into a tub.”

“Don’t ever’body think like you does. Lightnin’s got a brain. Don’t ‘magine it took much a’ song an’ dance t’ get Smitty clean. Poor feller needs a hero, an’ a smart, good-lookin’ kid like Lightnin’ makes a darn good one.” The old woman tugged the top of the slip and dress up over her waist as she shifted her tired bones. She then reached to her thigh to administer an energetic scratch. Finally having had enough, she fumbled with the clip on the garter and grouched, “Sound, help me out-ta these blasted hose!”

The three men in the room had been observing the old woman with repugnant fascination, half embarrassed at witnessing the immodest exhibition of bare thigh and half curious as to what in the world she was up to. Now two of them averted their eyes. Sound, though, dumb-founded, looked back and forth between Cap’n and Greg, then went to help out.

“Now, just ‘cause you go crawling to her aid doesn’t mean you get promoted,” razzed Greg.

Nurse pulled her dress back down to cover her more lady-like underwear. “You all been watchin’?” she scolded in disgust. “Shame on you boys, ever’one a’ you. Just ‘cause a lady can’t see’s no reason for a bunch a’ gentlemen t’ keep from turnin’ their backs when she ain’t dressed proper.”

Greg turned his back; Cap'n followed suit. But Sound, good soldier that he was, stayed put. "Do you still want my help?" he asked.

"Course I do! You're the only one 'at don't want none a' what I got."

Sound unclipped the garter straps and turned his back while Nurse wrenched her hose down around her ankles. "Might as well turn back 'round. I'm covered up 'gain. 'Sides, if you ain't seen it before, 'bout time you learned."

Greg fought to hold back a bellylaugh. Did she really think they were interested, or was it all an act? Slowly all three men turned to face the cantankerous woman. She, too, faced them, a sullen scowl etched on her face. Then, lifting the corners of her mouth into a toothless, measured, outlandish deliberate smile, she raised her hand, pointed her crooked finger straight at Greg, and cackled, "Gotcha', Sunny boy!" Then she pointed in turn at the other men. "An' you too, Cap'n. An' even you, Sound. Got ever' last one a' ya'. You was starin' at my legs, wasn't ya'?"

Greg busted out laughing, while Cap'n and Sound were still trying to figure out the joke. "That's fer givin' me such a hard time 'bout seein' your backsides!" Nurse struggled to speak between her own giggles. "An' ever' one a' you just stood there with yer lower jaws hangin' down, watchin' a helpless ol' blind woman expose herself to ya'!"

Sound and Cap'n finally caught on to what she'd done and joined in the hysterics. "You blind old bat!" Greg managed to spit out. "You see as good without your eyes as we do with them, and you were worried about something going wrong with the operation."

"Don't mean I wanna stay this way," Nurse added.

Greg nodded. "The doctor said he'll check you out tomorrow."

Nurse fumbled over to Greg and grabbed him by the arm. "And your sunny face is the first thing I wanna see."

Greg reciprocated with a soft pat on her hand. "I'll be there."

Nurse quickly withdrew. "Get down here, you two," she ordered, groping her way over to where Sound and Cap'n stood. At last her words turned hushed and tender. "Lost my Belle more 'an fifty years ago. An' now I got three grown men—an' two more 'at ain't here—all my sons. . . ." She squeezed the rough hand of her warrior. "Cap'n," she said, staring blindly into his face, "don't go frettin' none 'bout Lightin'. 'At boy's one a' th' most genius boys I ever met. I trust your

orders; you're a good leader, but you let him do his thing. After he makes sure his woman's safe, he'll be back. If'n I know how his mind works, first thing he'll probably wanna do is settle a bit a'th' score with Mr. Vinnie. . . . Sound." She gave his flaxen hand a shake. "If'n you were born by my loins, I wouldn't love ya' no different." The men swallowed hard. "All 'at said an' outta th' way—an' 'fore we go an' get all mushy—let's get workin' on Sunny's plan."

Trekking to within a block of Maggie's house, Mitch peered down the dark lane. In the glow of the street lamp the tan sedan, parked in front with two men sitting inside, stuck out like a hawk in a henhouse. Mitch silently crept up the sidewalk and hunkered near the back of a big black Cadillac parked at an angle to the sedan, some 50 feet away. Smitty followed. "Looks like we've got company," Mitch whispered. Smitty nodded. "But Vinnie wouldn't be sitting out front. Who do you think it is?" Smitty shook his head, then leaned his shoulder against the Cadillac to unwind from the busy day. Mitch balanced on his haunches, deciding what to do next. Then all of a sudden Smitty came to life. Decidedly upset, he tapped Mitch on the arm and rested his ear on the Cadillac's side door.

Mitch tried to read the mute's face. "What?" he asked.

Smitty pressed a finger to his lips, took Mitch's hand and pressed it against the warm metal. Then he cupped both hands behind his own ears and swayed back and forth like he was listening to a rock-and-roll band.

Mitch could feel it now, the steady vibration of music from inside. He raised his eyebrows and nodded.

Seeing through the smoke-black windows would be futile - and probably would get them caught; the fashionable car was meant to be private. Smitty pressed his ear against the door and again tapped Mitch on the arm, exhorting him to do the same. From within, a deep voice could be heard mingling with the low, thumping bass. "They're just sittin' there, Vinnie," the voice said. "They haven't moved in over an hour." After a moment's pause, the voice came again. "Whatever you say."

Mitch cowered even lower than before and, almost crawling on his belly, motioned for Smitty to follow. Thirty seconds—and thirty feet—later, they sat in the shadows of a massive honey locust tree near the street cor-

ner. "That was Frankie," Mitch gasped, "one of Vinnie's thugs!"

Like always, Smitty nodded. Then he tapped on his leather pouch of tools and pointed back out at the Cadillac.

"We don't need to yet, but who knows, we might just want to give him a little surprise before we leave. If those are cops down the street, Frankie might just come in handy."

Some 15 minutes later Mitch and Smitty had crossed the block to the next street, crawled over three fences, fled from one yippie Scottish terrier, and navigated through the lilac hedge into Maggie's back yard.

Mitch crept to the kitchen window and peered through a crack in the blinds. There was his beautiful wife, sitting at the table, eating supper. He longed to knock on the glass and barge right in, but still unsure of the intent of the visitors parked out front, he skulked back to where Smitty was bent over the lock on a small storage shed in the corner of the yard, a penlight held between his lips.

"Great idea, Smitty. We can wait inside until they go to sleep."

Proud of his contribution, Smitty deftly popped the lock and lifted it from its clasp. Both men then slipped inside the cozy wooden structure.

By now Ritter had become more than entangled in his own cozy deal. Only 40 minutes after his call to Vinnie, he stood at the checkout desk beside a well-dressed attorney. The man, none too happy to have been summoned from a late dinner with a beautiful brunette, was gathering the last of the documents Ritter had signed, shallow promises that he would return for trial.

"Later, mate," muttered Ritter as he signed for his one and only personal belonging: an old family photo. He stuffed it in his pocket and followed the lawyer out of the building to a late-model, dark-green Jaguar, parked in a Visitor's stall, the balance of the lot nearly empty. The car flashed its lights as the attorney approached. Ritter redirected his steps to the passenger side and opened the door.

"Don't sit on my seat," the lawyer said coldly. He walked back to the trunk and raised the lid.

"What, I got to ride in the bloody trunk?"

The attorney shot a look of disdain across the top of the car, then disappeared behind the open lid. Ritter began to walk toward the rear of the

automobile just about the time the attorney slammed the trunk and shoved a blanket in Ritter's face. "Cover the seat with this," he snapped.

"No problem, mate. Wouldn't want to get me nice clothes dirty, now, would we?"

Ritter fussed with the blanket as the attorney started the car and revved the engine. Then, just as he was sliding into the seat, the car lurched backwards. The tramp, his feet barely off the asphalt, wrestled to close the door, which rocked wildly on its hinges. Then the attorney again gunned the car's engine and the Jag pitched forward, snapping the door back, nearly closing it on Ritter's arm.

"Crimony, bloke!" Ritter shouted. "You 'bout smashed me bloomin' hand, cast and all."

The Jag and its antisocial driver became fixed on the road. What with traffic noise and the wind rushing past—both windows being wide open, presumably to allow for an ample supply of fresh air—Ritter figured there wouldn't be much conversation, so he kept his mouth shut for the duration of the ten-minute ride.

Skidding to a stop in front of Three Queens, the attorney spit out the window and snarled, "Take the blanket and throw it in the garbage. The both of you smell like . . ."

"You kidding?" interrupted the derelict, drowning out the attorney's words. "This thing might come in right handy."

The surly fellow stepped from the car, again spit on the sidewalk, and summoned security. "See that this piece of trash gets taken to Mr. Domenico's office."

Ritter got out, shut the door, leaned on the roof of the car with his good hand and asked, "You got a business card, mate?"

Turning on his heels, the lawyer stomped back to the Jag, got in, and slammed the door.

Ritter followed, egging him on. "Seriously," he remarked, bending down to speak through the window, "a chap like me don't ever know when good counsel might come in handy."

Foot to the throttle, the sleek sports car shot from under the canopy and skidded onto Bridger, disappearing into the lights of the city. Ritter now turned to face the guard. "Me counsel, he is. Just a bit high-strung, is all."

"You wish," the guard scoffed as he led Ritter to the elevator.

Frisked from head to toe, Ritter was put on an elevator and whisked

up to the 13th floor.

Parking himself in front of his presumed benefactor, Vinnie looked the bedraggled man up and down and shook his head in disbelief. “*You’re Ritter?*”

“‘At’s right, mate.”

“And you have some information for sale?”

“To the highest bidder.”

“Bidder?” Vinnie leaned back in his chair.

The vagrant went right to work establishing his worth. “See, the Feds didn’t want to pay me up-front. They figured to keep me locked up awhile, then I might be willin’ t’ give up me information for nothin’. On the other hand, that information might hurt you—or a young fella named Mitch Wilson—real bad.”

“How do you know Mitch Wilson?”

“Helped pluck him right from under your nose, I did. How’s the guard—the fella who got clobbered with the pipe?”

“You’re either very brave or very stupid,” Vinnie taunted. “If I told my men the guy that rung Carl’s bell was standin’ in my office, you’d vanish in a heartbeat.”

“Didn’t say I done it meself, mate. But I sure know who did. And now they’re comin’ after you.”

Vinnie’s eyes narrowed. “Who’re you talkin’ about?”

“Seems one a’ them fellas got hurt real bad by the little credit card shop you had stashed down in Eddie’s basement. Now he knows who took his money, I don’t think he’ll be walkin’ away ‘til he gets his pound a’ flesh. For all *you* know, he’s already got a man inside your new operation.”

The ruffian got to his feet and strutted over facing Ritter. “You better start tellin’ me somethin’ worth hearin’ or I’ll just let my boys have a little chat with you.” He punched the call button on the elevator.

Ritter’s cocksure bravado didn’t wane. “Now if I told you what I knows, you wouldn’t have much use for me, now would you, mate? ‘Sides, you just put up fifty-grand for me bail. All I want’s a shower, a hot meal, some new threads . . . an’ maybe a bit a’ respect.” He reached out and smoothed the gangster’s silk lapel between his thumb and fore-finger. Vinnie slapped his hand away. Unfazed, Ritter concluded by saying, “I might come in real handy when them fellas come snoopin’ ‘round your place. An’ when someone treats me right, I’m ‘bout as

loyal a' fella as you'll find."

The elevator door opened and the security guard stepped out. "Take Mr. Ritter down and find him a room," charged Vinnie, the flicker of a smile on his lips. "See that he gets somethin' to wear and then bring him back here. We'll be havin' a late meal together."

Ritter grinned broadly and stretched out his good hand, a gesture meant to seal the deal. Vinnie merely glanced down, turned, and walked away.

In the meantime, Mitch and Smitty had been rummaging through the contents of the storage shed by the flicker from a penlight Smitty kept in his bag of tools. Mitch stretched a pair of garden gloves over his hands and handed a pair to Smitty. "You know what to do then?" he asked, depositing a can of starter fluid in Smitty's bag. "You can't let him see you or he'll start shooting."

Smitty signaled his understanding, his face bathed in the glow.

"We'll wait until after I talk to Stef. See if you can find a couple of potatoes, then keep watch." Mitch slid open the shed door and both men crept to the back porch. With a few quick flicks of the wrist, Smitty unlocked the knob and extracted the dead bolt. Mitch entered first. Turning to Smitty, he said, "Wait here and keep an eye out."

Smitty bent over in the attitude of the Hunchback of Notre Dame, one eye wide open, the other nearly shut. He'd spent the last few years on the street. To him a minor residential breakin was no sweat. Indeed, the Chaplinesque humor proved to ease Mitch's own discomfort.

Mitch gave the little tramp a slap on the back and whispered, "That'll do." He inched his way down the hall. It seemed logical that the master bedroom would be the door at the far end on the right, a distance from the hall bathroom and the two other doors on the left. Slowly he turned the knob to one of the other rooms. His face drawn tight, he peered through the darkness.

The stillness of the scene was interrupted by a faint series of rhythmic sighs, sounds familiar to Mitch's ears. Stephanie lay sleeping near the window, under the soft gleam of the streetlamp flowing through the blinds.

Tiptoeing into the room, he eased the door closed and crouched near the head of the bed. He slipped the glove from his hand and stroked Stephanie's hair and neck. *I love her so much*, he thought, spellbound by

her exquisite features, profiled against the pillow. "Stef," he whispered. She rolled over, mumbling incoherently, her face only inches from his. "Stef," Mitch repeated, combing her hair behind her ear with his fingers.

At last her eyelids parted. She blinked, then smiled and said, "Mitch, I was just dreaming about you." All at once her face took on a blustery expression. She pushed herself up on her elbow, half sitting on the bed, and hissed loudly, "You lied to me!"

Mitch pressed a finger to his lips and glanced at the door. "Shh, you might wake Maggie."

"You lied to me . . ." Her voice faltered and her face hardened at the thought.

"I know . . . I'm sorry." He dropped his head, rolled forward and knelt on the floor, taking her by the hand.

Stephanie jerked her fingers away and came to a full sitting position, folding her arms across her chest. "You *know*?"

Tongue-tied, he looked again into her face. How he regretted the hurt he'd caused her.

"You know?" she repeated, her voice rising to a near yell.

"Shh, you'll wake Maggie." Once more he raised his finger and glanced over at the door.

This time Stephanie lowered her voice. "You know they're looking to arrest you for attempted murder? You know that two Federal agents are parked out front? You know that you're wanted for armed robbery? You know I was nearly raped and beaten by Al and Andy Kostecki? . . ." Her words trailed off. She turned her face from the shadows, gazing through the blinds. The moon's soft reflection glistened on the tears running down her cheeks.

In the dim light Mitch could see her swollen cheekbone and the dark bruise below her eye. His heart throbbed with pain. He stood and reached out to comfort his wife, to calm her, to hold her close. "Are you okay?" he croaked.

"No, I'm not okay. And I wasn't raped, if that's what you're asking." She drew abruptly away.

Mitch knew her too well. Now wasn't the time to go into detail. She was hurting, understandably so. "It isn't what it looks like. You have to trust me," he whispered. "You're not safe, either."

Suddenly, from the kitchen, a woman let out a scream and a ribbon of light shot under the door. Mitch jumped up on the bed, tugged his glove

over his hand, and slid open the window. “I haven’t got time to explain.” He kicked the screen from the window. “There’s a terrible man waiting in the street who wants to hurt you.” He swung his hips through the window and dropped silently to the ground. Then he stuck his face back in the opening. “Don’t tell *anyone* I was here, not even Maggie. Just say someone was in your room. I’ll be in touch. I *do* love you.” With that, he was gone.

The door to the bedroom burst open. Maggie, wrapped in a robe, visibly shaken, stood in the hallway. She hurried in and flicked on the light. “Are you alright? I heard voices and found a man in the kitchen.”

Stephanie could hardly move. She just sat there, sobbing, unsure, experiencing the fear of a dove—should she take wing and risk getting snatched from the sky by the hawk circling overhead, or take her chances with the cat on the prowl below?

From in back of the next-door neighbor’s hedge, Mitch looked on as the Federal agents pounded on the door. And then he struck out, hurdling fences, racing across yards.

Just up the street, Smitty crawled on his belly to the back of Frankie’s car and shot a long stream of starter fluid up its muffler. Taking a potato he’d stolen from Maggie’s pantry, he crammed it up the tailpipe with the sole of his shoe. He lunged back into the shadows and disappeared into the night.

THIRTY-FIVE

THE SMALL TABLE, BEDECKED with delicate linen, fine china and fancy silverware, rested on a splendid woven rug. The spread of food resembled a Singapore smorgasbord, the best, most palatable dishes the Three Queens chef's could offer.

Ritter, freshly showered, and dressed in a tailored suit and casual shirt, stood facing the table, awaiting his cue to enter the room.

"Come in, Mr. Ritter," Vinnie summoned pleasantly. The wicked smile he wore, however, was more that of a head maitre'd of a fine restaurant about to seat the Queen of England at a back-room bar. "My bet is, you ain't had a good eat like this in a season or two."

Ritter took in a mighty whiff and fanned the exquisite smells up in front of his nose. "You'd win 'at bet, a sure thing," he replied.

"Please, take a seat." Vinnie drew a chair from the table.

Ritter peered into Vinnie's grim face. "Don't mind if I do." Then, keeping a cautious eye on his foe, he plopped down onto the decorative cushion.

A swift move and a vigorous shake produced an unfolded linen napkin from the table. Vinnie dropped the cloth in Ritter's lap. "You might be needing that before we finish," he said. In scrupulous fashion, he strolled to the side of the table and lifted a silver dome. A plump cut of meat, roasted to perfection, steamed under the lid. Vinnie drew a long butcher knife and a square-shaped shaft from a cutting block and began to polish the knife's edge. "Prime rib?"

"Fine wit' me."

"Help yourself—all you can eat—while I cut the meat."

Still cautious, Ritter began in earnest to fill his china with the mouth-watering fare. He commented delightedly at each new item he added to his pile. Then, holding up a small vile of translucent liquid that was sitting by his plate, he asked, "What's this?"

Vinnie grinned with pride. "A special recipe my ol' man concocted a few years back."

"What you do wit' it, mate?" Ritter was beginning to feel a bit more at ease.

"You soak your meat in it." Vinnie lifted a thick cut of prime rib with the heavy knife and lay it atop the mountain of food.

"Just in time, too." Ritter picked up his fork, about to dig in, when Vinnie intervened. Reaching across Ritter's wrist with his own fork, Vinnie lowered the other's hand back onto the table. "Not so fast," he sneered. "I think the occasion calls for a few words."

Ritter looked on, bewildered. "Like a blessing?"

"Somethin' like that. Go on, you say it."

"I-I guess so . . ." stammered the tramp. "Been a bit, but I think I could manage." He bowed his head.

Vinnie acted instantly, raising the heavy knife and sinking it's finely-honed blade into the table top. Ritter's hand shot to his stomach; the frantic movement was punctuated by a blood-curdling scream and followed by a string of British vulgarities that would make a pub owner blush.

His face wearing a hideous smile, Vinnie ceremoniously lay the knife horizontally on the table cloth and picked up the quarter-inch tip of Ritter's little finger. Hoisting it like a trophy in front of Ritter's gaunt, horror-struck eyes, he placed it neatly on the stack of food. All the while, Ritter, ashen-faced, sat clutching his shortened pinky in his napkin.

"Now, *mate*," Vinnie articulated, nonchalantly sampling his wine and returning to the chair opposite the babbling Brit. "That 'special sauce' will kill the pain and stop the bleeding. We don't want to be uncivilized now, do we?" He stuck his pinky in the air as if sipping English tea, then said, "By the way, that was about the best prayer anybody ever prayed to me."

Ritter dipped his quivering finger in the clear fluid and watched it turn a brilliant red. The distinctively freakish moment was disrupted by an all-too-common sound: a cell phone's ring. Vinnie pulled his phone from his jacket. "What?" he shouted after checking the caller ID.

Frankie was on the line. "The Feds went in the house," he mumbled. "They was in a hurry."

“So?”

“So then they come out again and they’re lookin’ all around. I think they made me.”

“Come back. We have a better way,” Vinnie replied. Replacing the phone inside his jacket, he turned to Ritter and jeered, “You ever screw with me, I’ll cut off more than your pinky.”

Frankie, as ordered, turned over the ignition. The Caddy’s motor spun freely and coughed. He looked up to see one of the agents running down the street toward him, his weapon drawn. The thug cranked the motor again. This time the car hesitated, then rocked with an explosion that shook the new leaves from the nearby trees and split the exhaust pipe from front to rear. Safeguarding his partner, the second agent jumped in his own vehicle and sped for the Cadillac, to block the now disabled car’s path. Within minutes, Frankie lay spreadeagle on the asphalt, shellshocked, stripped of his weapon, cuffed like a hog-tied mule.

Halfway across town, Mitch and Smitty walked briskly in the direction of the old part of The Strip. Headed for Three Queens, their target was a certain shiny red sports car, a femme fatale just waiting to take them on a wild joyride. “I’d like to’ve seen Frankie’s face when he cranked the ignition,” Mitch chuckled. He rubbed at his eyes, trying to keep his mind on task and away from the latest 24-hour stretch without a real night’s sleep. “It’d give me even more pleasure to see the look in his eyes when he figures out he messed with the wrong guy. I’ll bet he put Al up to bullying Stef, and Andy was the one stealing credit card applications out of my trash.”

Smitty hunched to the side. Then, nodding, he flashed a frightful stare.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Smitty, you’ve got a pretty good sense of humor.” He again patted his friend’s shoulder. “I wonder if Nurse is spitting nails. I’ll bet she’s madder than a cornered hen by now, we’ve been gone so long.”

It turned out that Mitch would have lost that bet, for back in the hotel, Nurse and half her Alley Team were asleep—or at least in some cases, trying to sleep. She had commandeered one old mattress pad, while Sound lay on the other. Cap’n and Greg were sprawled out across the living room floor, wrapped in dirty blankets to insulate themselves

against the frigid air blowing in through the vent.

Greg lay uncomfortably on his side. He still hadn't become accustomed to such conditions. The hard floor felt more like a bed of nails. Right then he'd give his little finger for a nice, soft mattress—or even a lumpy car seat. His mind began playing tricks as he drifted in and out of a restless sleep.

From time to time Linda would appear, laughing hysterically and offering her hand to help him up off the cold, hard ice. It was 15 years earlier, their second date, to be exact. Greg had doubled with his best friend and roommate, Clark—and Linda just happened to be Clark's younger sister. University of Denver, 1987, he was a junior, she a sophomore. It was his first time at the ice rink.

A year earlier he and Clark had finally gone off to school together, that is, after horsing around a year and a half launching their own computer programming business. When his geeky little sister wanted to join them at college, Clark was furious. Then, after she arrived, he became overly protective, chasing off most boys even before they could ask for a date. Greg had almost felt bad for her.

"A mercy date," is what Clark had called it when he talked to Greg about going to the rink. Later on he'd learned it was a total set-up. Greg had practically been part of the family since the sixth grade—same schools, same church, same interests—and the little sister, who once was his friend, gradually became much more. What joy there had been when they married. Their children would have the same grandparents; they'd love, honor and cherish one another and live happily ever after. . . . Only one problem, Greg was being ousted from the family for infidelity.

Greg rolled over onto his back. The blissful dream had slipped south, leading to another sweaty, agonizing nightmare. Barely conscious, he concentrated on the beautiful face that had shone down on him as he lay on the ice. "Come back, come back . . . Linda, come back," he mumbled in his sleep.

Nurse lifted her head and listened. The blackness behind the patches on her eyes left her with an eerie, almost supernatural feeling. Her jaw tense, her mind grappled to adjust to the strange surroundings. Cap'n snored from near the kitchen door; Sound could be heard stirring in the next room. She lay her head back down, concentrating on her own rhythmic breathing to lull herself back to sleep.

Greg, in and out of an interminable, early twilight slumber, again

found himself lying on the ice, staring up at the same beautiful, innocent face of the only girl he'd ever loved. Her wild laughter had softened to a mild chuckle, and she still held her hand out to help him off the ice. Greg reached up and took hold of her gloved fingers.

"You think it's funny," he snickered in his sleep. With a swift tug of the arm, Linda too was sprawled across the ice, halfway on top of him. He laughed softly in his sleep. Nurse, now fully wakened, tossed sideways and mashed her new hairdo between the mattress pad and dirty pillow. Then, inserting a crooked finger in her ear, she hunkered down for a final try at sleep.

Greg writhed on the carpeted floor, basking once again in those strange, wonderful feelings he'd felt all those years before. The girl, dressed in several layers of warm winter gear, pressed up against his chest, laughing. She was almost like a sister to him, but now . . . lifting his head, he pressed his lips against that divine smile. Somewhat unexpectedly, Linda returned his affections in full.

The lingering kiss was interrupted by someone yelling. It was Clark who scurried across the ice and, skidding to a masterful stop, sprayed the both of them with a cold mist of frost. "Hey, what ya' doin'?" he teased, playing dumb. "Here I've been chasing all the boys away to keep my little sister pure for a special guy, and my best friend stabs me in the back!"

Greg laughed, but inside he wasn't laughing at all. He was completely captivated by the warm, dark brown eyes of his best friend's little sister. It was like he'd never seen her eyes before, or her lips, or her smile. For that matter, he'd never noticed the way her hair curled under to graze the back of her neck, or how it feathered down on her forehead. It was like meeting a long-lost love for the first time. The spray of frost began to melt on her warm skin, gliding down her nose. When he reached over to wipe away the droplets, Linda pressed her lips to his. Clark's chatter, the drone of skaters and music playing over the PA was drowned out by a rushing of wind, most likely blood pulsating through his head past his eardrums. Then Linda pulled away, flustered, her face a rosy blush.

"That does it," Clark had scolded. "I'm going to tell your mothers. . . ."

Mothers. Greg's mind wandered. The dream again had begun to steer south. Both his own mother and the mother of his bride were

beyond upset when his transgressions were exposed. He'd embarrassed his family, his children, his best friend, his boss, and ostracized himself from his religious congregation—all in one fell swoop. The local news media had relished the heyday of charges and countercharges. Reporters had especially jumped on Greg's claims that he was a victim of credit card fraud. The creditors, however, had lucked out when the tapes of him and Rayna surfaced. Now his bride was back living with her mother again.

Greg fidgeted beneath the blanket, again rattling himself from his dreams. The floor now was harder than ever, the reality of his miserable existence all too vivid. He hoisted his body to a sitting position, propped his head up against the wall, then wiped the sweat from under his chin.

"Dreams," Nurse whispered. "Sometimes they seem like an open door straight to your heart, don't they?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You was carryin' on in your sleep. . . ." Nurse struggled to stand. "Here, boy, help me up. I gotta go pee 'fore this here ol' well springs a leak."

Greg assisted the old woman to her feet and escorted her down the hallway.

"I'd rather be back in my shack, you know? Ain't hardly slep' a wink 'cause a' Cap'n's snorin'. Can't go back yet, though, 'til we fix a few things. Gonna take a lot a' hard work if we want t' put Mr. Vinnie outta business." Nurse rambled on as if at some point her words would converge into a coherent thought.

Greg gave a nod. "I can't ever go back to the way it was," she said, steering her drifting thoughts back to center. He maneuvered Nurse's hand onto the doorknob. "Here you are." Then, as a creature of habit, he reached inside the room and switched on the light, an act he'd performed for his children hundreds of times before.

"Don't need the light, Sunny boy. I got my eyes patched, 'member? Get my patches off tomorrow. How 'bout you?"

Greg snuffed out the single overhead bulb. "I can see just fine."

Nurse dismissed his response with a grunt. "So can I. Just nice t' have a bit a' help now and then from someone 'at can see better 'an me. . . . Someone t' hold my hand—let me know they're here fer me."

Greg leaned against the wall outside the bathroom to ponder the old woman's words. In truth, they were right on the money.

Mitch and Smitty hunkered in the alley near Nurse's shack. Smitty's small flashlight, its batteries nearly dead, was pressed tightly between his lips, its faint beam directed at the brass lock on the door of the big green power box feeding high-voltage life to Three Queens. The lockpick's hands wrestled with the tools as he fought to ease the tumblers into place.

A bulging plastic bag, filled with soggy wet ash from the colossal bonfire that had reduced Carson's Body Shop to a pile of cinders, hung from Mitch's hand. "It's a tough one, huh?" Mitch asked. The shaft of light bobbed up and down with the answer. "I'll go start on the railing." He reached down and lifted a large, scorched wrench from the ground. It, too, had been culled from the body shop rubble. Pacing some 100 feet away to the alley entrance between Eddie's Gym and Kitty's Escort Services, he cranked on one of the three huge bolts that affixed the concrete railing to the floor of the parking lot. The structure's floor stood a good four feet above the alley floor, providing adequate cover for hiding. Occasionally he peered under the voids between the bolts to see if the night watch had started their rounds. The last thing he wanted to have happen was some gung ho guard shoving a gun in his face or plying a hard nightstick to the back of his legs.

A silent tap on his shoulder momentarily made Mitch's heart skip a beat. Turning, he came face to face with Smitty's silly yet proud grin. The mute stood holding the brass lock between two fingers, swinging it back and forth like the liberty bell. He swayed to the silent chiming cadence playing inside his head.

Mitch exhaled a gigantic sigh of relief. "I thought I was had," he gasped, sucking in a new breath.

It took ten minutes to remove the first rusty bolt. The second stubbornly fought back, refusing to budge even as both men threw their entire weight and muscle behind the wrench.

Even in the wee hours of morning, the offices of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were operating in high gear. Doling out the grease on the proverbial wheels of justice were two separate sources. One, a Federal prisoner named Lawrence Ritter, who, by the grace of the biggest Jersey crime boss wannabe, had been processed and bailed free. The second, less likely source was the crime boss's cousin, now locked in a Federal holding cell, who went by the name of Frankie. While keeping an eye on a home that had reported a prowler, he'd been nabbed by two of the Bureau's best.

Out on Maggie's front porch, Barnes coached a female agent. "Stay with them 24-seven; keep them in sight. We'll move them to a safe house in the morning." Certain the agent had understood his instructions, he marched down the concrete walk to his sedan, Horne trailing closely behind. "The young one wasn't telling us all the truth," muttered Barnes. "I could see it in her eyes."

Horne nodded. "What do you think she was hiding?"

"I don't know. The story just doesn't pan out. No forced entry, not a mark on her, two guys enter, one flees at first sign of the old woman, no prints, and, at best, a vague description of the one in her room. Then, to beat all, the son of the biggest crime boss in Jersey gets busted for it while the undercarriage of his car is ripped to shreds by a potato bomb. The whole thing smells like the same kid that took out Vinnie's elevators and disabled two of his guards without so much as firing a shot."

"Mitch?" Horne opened the passenger door and both men ducked inside.

"I've been on the Vegas beat nine years now," said Barnes as he attached his seatbelt, "and I've never seen any criminal pull those kind of stunts. My hunch is he isn't finished. Someone's got the thumbscrews to him or something."

"Why would Vinnie have a price on him?"

"The only thing I can guess is the kid has something Vinnie wants, like maybe Mike's body. What do you say we go have a chat with Mr. Domenico?"

Barnes and Horne cruised north on The Strip, headed for Eddie's Gym, while in the adjoining alley Mitch and Smitty lay the last rusty bolt on the crumbling asphalt of the alley. "It's going to get hairy now. You sure you're up to it?" Mitch asked his faithful sidekick. Smitty pressed his crooked body between Mitch and the parking structure in an 'I dare you to try and stop me' posture. "Okay, okay, lets make some fireworks."

Both men crept back to the power box and strained to raise the lid. With the jumble of cables and connectors exposed, they stood in awe, not so much at the sight, but from the feeling and sound of the power surging through the massive wires and posts. It was a hum, of sorts, coming from a living entity whose heartbeat they were about to put into cardiac arrest.

Mitch held his plastic bag full of fine, wet ash in one hand, along with a set of license plates he'd stripped from a nearby car. In the other he gripped the big wrench from the body shop. "You might as well climb up on the parking lot," he told Smitty, "and whatever you do, don't look at the box. You'll see spots into next week—could even blind you temporarily."

Smitty readily obeyed and stretched his long legs to gain a foothold on the upper platform, then swung them up and over the guardrail. Mitch took the wrench in his palm and bounced it up and down, like a nervous pitcher about to hurl a baseball. "You ready?" he asked Smitty, hefting the wrench over and over to gauge its capacity for flight. Smitty nodded from the shadows and turned his back to the box.

With acute accuracy, and using an underhanded motion, Mitch tossed the wrench for real, then turned his back to a cascade of brilliant flashing lights spraying out at him like short bursts from a thousand water balloons on a hot summer day.

The sound of electrical current jumping from one giant electrode to the other crackled and spat, echoing up and down the alley. Mitch glanced to his right across the parking structure toward the casino. Its neon lights flickered briefly—then continued to broadcast their glowing invitation to 'come and give of your earnings.'

Mitch couldn't believe his eyes. The wrench had made a solid connection between two electrodes, so why hadn't it shut the place down?

"Hey!" An angry voice came from across the parking lot. "What're you doing over there?" It was Tony, the red-faced guard who worked the late-night shift.

Meanwhile, out on the street the two FBI agents stepped out of their car in front of the casino. "Hey, did you see that?" Horne asked as they approached the canopy of Three Queens.

Barnes, wary, answered, "Yeah. The lights flickered."

"You see any of the other buildings do the same?"

"No, but I wasn't sure I saw it the first time." Barnes, suddenly on full alert, made a beeline for the valet, who slouched outside the door. "Where's your power supply?" he shouted.

The young man lifted his hands and shoulders, bewildered. "Got me."

Back in the shadows, Smitty lifted his hands in the air, Tony's gun trained on him. The guard slowly shuffled over to the timid-looking man, yelling into his radio, "I got a guy on level one playing with explosives

or something.”

Mitch was crouched in the shadows, on hands and knees, eyeing the power box, wondering what to do next. One end of the wrench appeared to be tightly welded to a terminal. At the other end, however, a small half-circle of metal had been burned away, keeping the tip of the wrench poised just a fraction of an inch from the opposing terminal. Without contact, the current would remain unbroken.

“I asked you a question,” Tony thundered again.

Smitty just stood there, caught in Tony’s flashlight beam, his hands held high, his back to the power supply, a goofy look of ‘I didn’t do it, Mom’ plastered across his face.

Mitch crept over to Nurse’s shack and crawled under the carpet curtain. Groping about in the dark, his hand fell on the woman’s metal milk crate, filled to the brim with dirty clothes. He parted the curtain and strolled into the alley. “Come on,” he called out to Smitty, coming to a stop in front of the power box, the basket at his waist. “Let’s go get this laundry done.”

The guard stepped to the railing and redirected the flashlight and gun at Mitch’s face. “You!”

“Oh, Tony. Long time no see. Had any trouble with the elevators lately?” Mitch flashed an innocent smile.

The guard reached awkwardly for his radio.

Smitty, still with his hands in the air and his eyes on Tony, waited for his hero to work a miracle.

Mitch kept up his casual conversation. “Hold that thought,” he said to Tony. “Oh, I forgot the bleach”—then he pitched the basket onto the open powerbox and dove for cover. The basket landed on the wrench, nudging it just enough so that it bridged with the opposing terminal. A dazzling flash erupted, casting radiant shadows across the parking garage. After another burst of white light, the box burst into flames, consuming the basket of clothing in a single heated breath.

Tony blinked only once before Smitty, charging, swept low and took the guard’s feet out from under him. As his bulky shoulders careened back towards the concrete, Tony let go of the flashlight. It bounced once, then came to rest in Smitty’s grasp.

A monstrous rush of air was expelled from the man’s lungs as he hit the ground. Then, clawing at his eyes, he cried, “I can’t see!”

Mitch lunged over the railing and kicked Tony’s gun across the parking

lot. With their task completed, the pair bolted up the ramp leading to the second level and disappeared into the darkness.

THIRTY-SIX

SWALLOWED UP IN DARKNESS, the penthouse's white carpet, with its medley of leather furniture, expensive fixtures and nude statues, became a colossal, cryptic maze. Vinnie groped for the remote control to the electric blinds, picked it up, and pointed it at the windows. The blinds remained in place, indifferent to both his repeated clicks of the button and his incendiary mutterings. Even more maddening was the fact that his primary goal was being thwarted by a larger force.

Thoroughly enraged, he flung the inoperable remote at the blinds, the blinds which both shut out his view of the more imposing casinos—which he envied—and preserved for him a temporary respite from the storm. These same blinds now held in check his devouring desires to own more than could be had by legal means. His ambitions were now held captive to the inner darkness that cankered his soul and obscured his vision.

With the floor's dim emergency light aglow, Vinnie wandered toward the emergency stairwell and vaulted down the stairs. Each landing brought him one floor closer to freedom, to blessed light.

By contrast, Mitch and Smitty calmly picked their way past rows of vehicles, past the confusion and the darkness to where Vinnie's Ferrari was parked. Apparently amid the muddled chaos, the man commissioned to guard the vehicle had deserted his post. Mitch pulled the key from his pocket and turned to Smitty. "If this isn't the right key, you'll have to work fast."

Smitty readied himself by unzipping his bag and rummaging through his tools. He seemed remarkably calm, almost thriving on the challenge. Mitch put his thumb on the alarm's disarm button. "You ready?" Smitty gave the usual nod and handed his dim flashlight and a pair of needlenose pliers to Mitch. "If he changed the lock you remember what to do." Smitty grinned in anticipation. Mitch pressed the button. Nothing happened.

Barnes, meanwhile, after consulting with the front desk and then with the building's maintenance crew, was led down the ramp towards the crippled

power box. On the parking lot's lower level, Barnes and a second guard came across Tony, who was screaming bloody murder and mewling that he'd been blinded by an explosion. Even as the man still groveled about on the concrete, searching for his gun, Barnes jerked the flashlight from the second guard's hand and went off to inspect the upperlevel parking.

In the employee parking section of the second level, Mitch slid the key in the lock and cranked it sideways. Suddenly the car's alarm erupted in a deafening scream. He yanked the key free and made room for Smitty to work his magic. Already poised for action, the little man shoved his picks into the lock and fussed with the tumblers. A little over halfway down Three Queens' stairwell, Vinnie cleared the 5th floor. Though hardly out of breath, he panted furiously, his inner fear now having intensified into a savage anger, focused on one punk kid who'd had the nerve to tell him no.

Smitty's little light, its batteries nearly spent, flickered, then died. Smitty stopped to take from his pouch the larger light he'd gotten off Tony and handed it to Mitch. There was no reason not to use it now, not with all the horns and sirens blaring. "You can do it," Mitch said as calmly as he could. "You can do it."

Vinnie careened past the third floor. Only one more to go 'til he reached the parking level. One more opportunity to snuff out the source of his problems.

Inside the dimly lit casino, Horne and a half-dozen security guards had managed to get themselves clear of the jittery crowds and headed out the front door. Under the canopy they went, towards the parking booth.

Amid this great, raucous, swirling whole, the pieces finally began to converge as one. Vinnie clambored out the stairwell door on the second floor and stormed past the milling guests, Barnes cleared the draw bar and bolted to the upper level, and Smitty, completing his artistry, flicked his wrist and snapped his tools from the lock. Mitch yanked open the door and reached in to pull the hood latch. Smitty jumped behind the wheel, dropping the plastic bag filled with ash and licence plates behind the driver's seat. From the glow of the interior light Smitty rammed his tools into the ignition while Mitch, flashlight in hand, threw open the hood and jerked the cover off the fuse panel.

"Alarm, alarm . . . come on, where are you?" Mitch muttered as the alarm's pulsating mantra continued to assault his ears. He scanned the schematic. "Accessories . . ." he read. With the pliers he tugged the fuse free.

The screaming ceased. Smitty gave a thumbs up and lunged across the console into the passenger's seat. Mitch slammed the hood and jumped behind the wheel. The bucket seat that had once felt so comfortable and snug, now pinched at his hips.

By now Vinnie had exited the casino on the level where his car was parked. Barnes had ascended the ramp on the same level. Mitch turned the lock pick. The motor spun free, as if no spark, no life, was within. He slammed the wheel with his fist. "We're dead! The thing runs on a computer chip . . . molded inside the ignition key." He glared out the side window. Vinnie, a bleak outline against the one dim emergency light, was on a dead run toward the car, his gun swinging at his side.

Smitty's unruffled demeanor started to wane. Frantically he pointed at Mitch's fist. "What?" Mitch yelled. Smitty cowered and dropped his head in his lap, his white-knuckled hands covering his ears. Mitch opened his hand, suddenly realizing that maybe Smitty was right. *Vinnie may have changed the alarm and door locks, but that doesn't necessarily mean the right parts for the foreign auto were in stock.*

Mitch yanked the pick set free and jammed the key in the ignition, just as a torrent of glass sprayed down the side of his face. A moment later he felt the cold barrel of Vinnie's gun collide against his temple and an even colder voice echo through the concrete structure. "You lose, Mitch. This time I'll kill you."

Mitch froze, his hand still gripping the key. "And you cheated again. Probably did the same thing with your old man, didn't you?" He turned to look into the black barrel.

"An' he had the same stupid look on his face as you do," murmured Vinnie as he pressed forward and cocked the hammer back.

"FBI! Drop your weapon and step away from the car!" Barnes was crouched several cars away, his feet splayed apart, his hands locked into firing position on his Glock 23. Vinnie craned his neck to weigh his options. Seizing the moment, Mitch cranked the ignition and rammed the car in reverse, simultaneously twisting the wheel hard to the side, sweeping Vinnie off his feet. The gangster squeezed off a round, then another as he sprawled across the hood of the car. Slamming the stick shift in first gear, Mitch lurched forward, catapulting Vinnie back over the car and depositing him on the hard ground. The mobster bounced once, then skidded like a duck landing on an icy pond.

Mitch flipped the headlights on and held the pedal down, sending the

Ferrari's tires smoking and spinning madly on the slick concrete. Barnes aimed his weapon and tried to yell above the high-pitched squeals. Mitch only saw his lips move as the headlights flashed past.

The Ferrari jumped the curb and sped for the exit, sparks flying from its undercarriage. Halfway down the ramp, a sea of blue shirts—together with one FBI agent—parted like the red sea to let the crimson chariot through. Once the car had roared past, the blue-shirts, with their jostling lights, raced back down the ramp. Only Horne continued on up to back up his partner. The car's front and back bumpers ricocheted off the base of the ramp, sending a spray of sparks behind. Mitch now steered the car for the exit at the far end of the lot. Its cross bar was down, but it wouldn't stand in the way of his escape. Then, all at once, the Ferrari's headlights shown on a sole guard, who had stepped in its path. Facing the speeding car, he pointed his weapon.

Mitch muscled the car into second gear and gunned the engine, a warning to Tony to either move or be run down. Tony stood his ground. Headlights in his eyes and unable to take decent aim, he pulled the trigger. The hot piece of lead skimmed under the car and rebounded up the concrete ramp, sending the formation of pursuing guards back on their heels.

Mitch yanked on the emergency brake and, his eyes still trained on Tony—who by now had turned to run—cranked the wheel hard to the left. In a delicate show of exactness and precision, the car skidded sideways and butted the guard from behind, sending him sprawling across the ground. Mitch glanced up the ramp. An entourage of guards—now half the size as before—was once again bearing down on the fleeing vehicle.

Jerking his head in the direction of the cross bar, Mitch's heart sank. A smaller group of guards, a detachment from the original pack, had circled around and come from the other side. Finally they'd netted their prey. Mitch punched the car back into first gear and inched his way into the parking stall.

Mashing the Ferrari's front bumper against the concrete barrier, he pressed the throttle with one foot, the clutch with the other and pushed. The barrier began to teeter under the force of the spinning tires.

As the barricade toppled to the alley floor four feet below, Mitch yanked back on the shifter, sending the car skidding backwards into the empty parking stall opposite. Then he shifted into first and yelled, "Hang on, Smitty!

We'll see how this baby flies!"

In an attempt to brace himself for the impact, Smitty pressed his hands up against the roof as the car hurtled forward. In one last, shrill cry, the car's engine screamed through the jagged opening. As the tires left the solid surface in a spectacular display of sparks and flying gravel, Mitch hit second gear in midair and the car vanished down the alley between Eddie's Gym and Kitty's Escort Services.

"You miss her somethin' terrible, don't ya'?" Nurse lay on her back, facing the bedroom's open window. Street noise poured into the apartment past the torn screens and shabby drapes.

"I'd never believed in the right girl coming along until the first time we kissed. At first I thought I'd be embarrassed bringing my best friend's little sister home with a ring on her finger. But I was so in love with her after the first week, I could hardly do my school work. We were married only two weeks later, during Christmas break." Greg took a deep breath and let out a quiet sigh. "I don't know how I got my mind so off track."

"I'll tell ya' how. . . . It killed the cat," Nurse mumbled.

"Pardon?"

"I seen it many a time. Some young feller with nothin' t' do just decides he wants t' take a peek inside 'at whorehouse a' Mr. Vinnie's. Next thing ya' know, they got him by the seat a' the pants, so t' speak. Just like a cat-killed by curiosity." Nurse paused and scratched her backside with her fingers, gnarled as a tree root.

"See, when I was a girl we used to have a gangly time keepin the weasels outta th' hen house. One a' them li'l rascals could bite the head off ever' hen in the coop 'fore my Pappy could get the shotgun off the wall. So we'd set out these weasel traps. It was easy teachin' the dogs t' stay away; we used a mousetrap on their nose. See, all we had t' do was flip his nose in it a time or two with somethin' 'at smelled like the bait, an' he'd never get close again. Darn cats, though, they thought they was smarter 'an dogs. They'd reach into that trap with their paws an' just get a little taste t' lick off. Ever'day, from trap to trap, jus' a little taste. Pretty soon they had a terrible likin' fer 'at nasty bait, an' no matter how many times we flipped their noses they'd go back fer 'nother taste. Well, I don't need t' tell ya' much more, now, do I?"

"Nope. It's pretty clear. I know what I did wrong, I just don't know

why. I already had everything I really wanted. . . .” Greg yawned.

“‘At’s been my point all ‘long, Sunny. See, them cats did too. Had all the food they could eat in the barn. ‘Fact, Pappy made the bait from dried catfood. He’d stir it up with a heapin’ pile a’ chicken crap, drop a few feathers in the mix, sometimes add a little blood from one a’ them poor dead hens, and drop it on the trap. Didn’t matter a lick. Them cats, with plenty a’ food right there in the barn—stuff ‘at didn’t have no stinkin’ poop in it, neither—had a hankerin’ for Pappy’s mix.” Nurse rubbed at the patches still covering her eyes. “See, th’ problem started when them cats’d jump up on the milkin’ table in th’ barn. ‘Course they weren’t supposed t’ be on the table. ‘At’s where Pappy’d make up his weasel mix an’ cleaned them dead hens for eatin’. Anyways, them cat’s liked t’ get up where they wasn’t supposed t’ be an’ take a tiny taste a’ ‘at blood. Same thing gives life t’ one a’ God’s critters when it’s pumpin’ through their veins, ‘ll kill ‘nother critter when it ain’t, I guess.”

Greg cleared his throat. “You’ve told a good story, but I’m not a cat and I still want my wife and family back.”

“Lemme finish,” muttered Nurse. “See, when one a’ them cats got caught in a trap, they’d yowl and cry ‘til Pappy’d pull the shotgun off the wall. Them stupid cats’d be in so much pain, wouldn’t let him close ‘nough t’ get ‘em out. Pappy tried once—got so scratched up he never cared t’ try again.”

“It sounds like the way I felt in the car that night. It was going to be a mercy killing, a way to put me out of my pain.”

“‘At’s right,” Nurse continued, her voice softening. “‘Cept one ol’ cat named Tommy. . . . See, I decided I was goin’ t’ teach him never t’ taste ‘at blood. I loved that rascal more ‘an ever’ other cat in th’ barn put t’gether. Always held him close, gave him extra milk. Even let him sleep in my bed. Fer two whole years ‘at Tommy cat kep’ from goin’ after ‘at weasel bait. Thing is, one night Tommy got tired a’ stayin’ in my room; wanted t’ see what else was out there. I figured Tommy knew ‘nough so he wouldn’t have no trouble, so now an’ again I’d let him go. Poor ol’ Tommy musta’ taken a taste when I weren’t lookin’—course I didn’t know he’d tasted, so weren’t nothin’ I could do ‘bout it—‘cause ‘fore I knew it he was doin’ like all ‘em other cats, sneakin’ taste a’ that blood. An’ sure ‘nough, ol’ Tommy got caught in one a’ Pappy’s traps. . . . Pappy took the shotgun down off the wall an’ made me stay inside. Thought I was gonna die ‘at night. I loved that ol’ cat more ‘an any

critter on the face a' God's green earth. I wasn't 'bout t' let him die without a fight. So I stormed 'round the house, madder 'an a bee in a bonnet, expectin' t' hear 'at shotgun blast."

Greg yawned again. "Poor cat . . ."

"Hold on, I ain't finished yet." The old woman gave a little whistle in an attempt to recapture her listener's attention. "See, when Pappy found Tommy, 'at ol' cat stopped his screamin' right then an' there and looked up, sorry-like. Pappy drew the shotgun up t' his shoulder an' took aim, but Tommy just kept' lookin' up with them big, green, gentle eyes a' his, like he was sayin' he'd never do it 'gain. Pappy knew how much 'at cat meant to me, an' went t' find a gunny sack. Tommy didn't like it none, bein' shoved inside 'at sack, but he trusted Pappy, knew he hadn't a mind t' hurt him. Still, he fought like a wildcat when Pappy pulled off the trap, 'cause it hurt so bad. An' 'fore ya' knew it, Pappy brought Tommy int' th' house. Took some doin' t' get 'at paw mended—poured pert near a half bottle a' mecurochrome on it—but ol' Tommy never even come close t' one a' them traps again. I knew I could trust him from then on. Had a constant 'minder, ya' know, him limp in' 'round like 'at an' all. . . ."

Greg, now deep in thought, let out another sigh. "I think maybe it's time I put a little trust in someone, get a little help, too. Thank you, Nurse."

Three a.m., and the business district was quiet and still—except for the two men with gloved hands, smearing black ash over the glistening surface of a red Ferrari parked behind the dumpsters of National Restoration. Mitch whispered over to his accomplice. "I'll drop you off at the apartment, Smitty. The drive to Logandale will be the scariest leg of the trip. Every trooper, sheriff, cop and Federal agent will be out looking for us."

Smitty wagged his head slowly, like a precocious little brother being sent home to mommy when the big boys wanted to play. "It's best, Smitty," Mitch tried to explain. "If I'm not back this morning by six, you'll know I've been caught. After all, this car is *still* a Ferrari, even if it is black. Plus, you need to let the rest of the team know what we did tonight—and we did a fine job of it, too. You're about the best pick I've ever met."

Smitty let slip a meager smile.

"I'm not nearly as worried about Stephanie as before. Now that the Feds know someone walked right past them, they'll be on the lookout. Vinnie will be wrung through the mill because of Frankie's screwup.

And, to make things worse for him, we stole his car right out from under his nose. He'll be so mad he won't be able to think straight. You let the gang know the gun wasn't in his car like he said it'd be. We'll have to come up with a better way to get it."

Mitch circled the car and tossed his gloves into a dumpster. Smitty did likewise. "Here's the key to the apartment. Sneak in and don't make a sound, I'll be back before they wake up." He held out the key. Once Smitty had taken it from his fingers, Mitch kept his hand extended, ready for a handshake. "You did real good, Smitty," he said tenderly, "and I'm sorry I yelled at you back in the parking lot. . . . If I'd had a big brother, I'd want him to be just like you." Smitty blinked in rapid succession as he gripped Mitch's hand, then pulled him forward in an embrace, his long arms nearly pinning Mitch's to his side.

For a full 30 seconds Smitty clung to his new best friend. Finally he drew back, wiped his big eyes and motioned for Mitch to leave.

Mitch waved him in the direction of the car. "Come on, I'll run you to the apartment. Now, hand me a wrench so I can change these plates." Smitty nodded his head and, pulling a tiny adjustable wrench from his pouch, again pointed for him to leave. Mitch again motioned towards the car. "It's at least ten miles back." Smitty nodded that he understood and pointed one last time. "Okay, I'll see you in a couple of hours," Mitch said, ending the debate. And before he was finished speaking, Smitty had turned on his toes and begun to jog away.

Mitch flung the old plates in the dumpster and brushed the dust from his hands. Taking a small rag he'd found in the trunk, he wiped the shards of broken glass from the driver's seat, got in, drove the few blocks down to Craig, and steered the car northbound onto I-15. Even with the car throttled at 70 mph, Mitch was passed by faster-moving vehicles. Unfortunately, with the accessory fuse pulled, the radar detector and jamming device were rendered useless.

Only ten minutes into the drive, Mitch, nearly exhausted, felt his eyelids getting heavy. The warm night air surged through the broken driver's window and whistled around the car. Mitch reached over and turned on the radio. Staring straight ahead, feeling the music as much as hearing it, he struggled to concentrate on the road. His tired mind drifted to Stephanie, her broken heart, her feelings of mistrust. He'd hurt her. She had good reason to be angry.

A southbound car traveling at a high rate of speed passed unno-

ticed. Mitch flipped through the radio settings to help him stay awake, finally landing on a station offering classic rock and playing The Beatles' "Imagine"—one of his and Stephanie's favorites. The music proved to perk him up, but also to prick his conscience. How would he ever make things right with her? His mind wandered in twists and turns—until suddenly it reverted to the here and now by a set of rapidly closing lights in his rearview mirror. The dark vehicle quickly made up the gap, the bar lights across its top still unlit. Mitch remained calm and shifted to a lower gear, increasing the rpms on the high-performance engine, hoping the cop would pass him on the left. If worse came to worst, he could easily outrun the cop. But what lay ahead, that he feared.

Several minutes crawled by. The trooper backed off. Realizing that he'd been found out and that the cop was biding his time, waiting for backup, Mitch slammed his foot to the floorboard. The Ferrari pulled away, fishtailing up the highway, a cloud of blue tire smoke trailing behind. Mitch peered back over his shoulder. The red and blue lights had broken through the wall of smoke, yet were receding in his mirror.

The 220-mph limit boast Vinnie had made was accurate. The light traffic was an expected early-morning blessing, and the only thing that kept the high-speed chase from being a deadly game.

The normal hour drive from Las Vegas to his grandpa's junkyard was cut to 20 minutes. No other patrol car came into view, and if another cop had been alerted, he was probably waiting farther on down the highway. Mitch skidded into Grandpa's yard and lunged from the Ferrari. The pack of petulant dogs, roused from their lazy-dog dreams, scuttled from the garage. Mitch had no time even to say hello. He went straight to work, jumping into the loader-type forklift and cranking up its engine.

The bedlam out in the yard woke Grandpa from his sleep. He snatched his 9mm sidearm from the dresser drawer and pulled up his trousers. Marching out onto the front porch, he saw only the tailend of the loader disappear into the high-piled stacks of dismembered autos.

Grandpa urged his boots over his stockinged feet and lit out across the yard, through the tangled labyrinth of cars. Farther ahead, the loader's engine stopped. The old man turned his head and listened to the sounds. Often they played tricks on his ears as they bounced from one pile of rusty autos to the next. The dogs had gone quiet, and they were nowhere in sight.

Then he heard it—a sound he knew all too well. As fast as his old legs would carry him, he hurried to the old tin shed out back. Someone stepped from the building and slid the big doors shut, half a dozen dogs dancing at the intruder's heels. "You done it, didn't you boy?"

Mitch flinched. "Crap, Grandpa! You scared me half to death."

"Me scare *you*?" Grandpa's whisper was more a wheeze. "Boy, how do you think I felt, all this wild ruckus yanking me from my bed?"

"Sorry, I haven't got time to explain. You'll be seeing the cops any minute now. I need your truck keys."

Grandpa crammed his hand deep into one of his coverall pockets and drew out his key ring. In another pocket he fondled the handle to his gun. "Best hurry up then, boy. She ain't got much gas, but she ought t' get you back to town. Take her through the reservation. Won't be nobody lookin' there."

Mitch sprinted across the yard, the dogs still on his heels. The distant sound of sirens rent the stillness of the night. The old Chevy truck's tires barely squealed when they hit the pavement. Mitch drove another quarter of a mile down the highway, then turned onto a road leading through Indian land. At that point the dogs pivoted like a pack of wolves and returned home. Grandpa hustled back to the house, slowing as he came. Wincing in pain, he grabbed at his chest and shoulder. "It ain't a good time t' be comin' home, dear God," he murmured as he knelt in the dirt and struggled for breath. "Just ain't a good time."

THIRTY-SEVEN

OBLIVIOUS TO THE EARLY MORNING news reports chronicling the hysteria surrounding the blackout at Three Queens, the Alley Team began to rise and take turns in the single bathroom. Nurse sat on the toilet lid as Sound fussed with her hair and make-up. “You know I always wanted to be a hair dresser,” he gibbered, “but my dad wouldn’t hear of it. Sent me off to electronics school. The old man worked as a truck driver, until his back got so bad he couldn’t drive anymore. Still, he and mom scrimped and saved to get me through technical college. And how did I repay them? Married a woman and a year later got a divorce. But it was all for the best. Finally admitted to myself something was different. She actually knew it before I did. Bless her heart, she would’ve stayed with me, too.”

“Shh,” Nurse put a finger to her lips. “Cap’n just let someone in th’ front door.” Sure enough, Smitty’s footsteps were heard coming down the hall, with Cap’n’s close behind. Without knocking, the guileless fellow shoved his smiling face inside the partially open doorway, ready to report the night’s activities. “Smitty, that you?” Nurse said. “Where’s Lightnin’?”

Smitty began to make frantic hand signals. “Hold on, Smitty,” Cap’n ordered. “You got to go a bit slower. Can’t ya see Nurse can’t see what your sayin’?” Smitty paused and peered at the bandages on Nurse’s eyes. Greg, too, peeked in, chewing on a sweet roll. “Hey,” Nurse grouched, “it’s feelin’ crowded in here. Y’all get out and we’ll foller ya’. Me an’ Sound is done anyways, ain’t we Sound?.” The whole gathering reconvened in the comparatively roomy kitchen, where Smitty resumed his narrative. First he hooked his forefingers together and pulled.

“Stretch?” Sound asked.

Smitty shook his head and put his thumb and forefinger an inch

apart.

“Short?” Sound responded.

Smitty threw his arms together to form a cross.

“The opposite of short?”

Smitty nodded, hooked his fingers once more and tugged.

“Long?” Sound asked.

Smitty nodded, then put his hands together in the shape of a book.

“Book?” Cap’n asked.

Smitty shook his head and rubbed his thumb and forefinger together.

“Close to book?”

Smitty nodded.

“Story,” Sound said. “*Long* story.”

Smitty nodded enthusiastically and pointed at Sound.

And so, in the manner of a game of charades, the Alley Team sat down to hear the modern-day tale of the big bad wolf and the two mighty woodsmen who saved the day.

The sun was high in the sky when Mitch crawled from the culvert. Grandpa’s old truck just hadn’t had enough fuel in its tank to get him across the desert, especially driving it like—as Grandpa would say—‘a bat out of hell,’ the way Mitch did. *The old man knew how to deal with the highway patrol*, he thought, brushing aside the fleeting worry. A few of them were even his friends. Besides, the car was so cleverly hidden they’d never find it.

He smiled to himself at first, then began to laugh out loud as he strode along the old dirt road, still some 25 miles from town. “I hope I get to see his face when we swap cars,” Mitch said aloud. He booted a dusty stone, soccer-style, down the middle of the road. The rock rolled out about 20 feet and skidded to a stop. “The idiot thinks he can get away with cold-blooded murder.” He stepped up to the stone again and gave it a second whack with his foot. “Blackmail, extortion, going around ruining people’s lives. . . .” The stone stalled in the middle of the road again, this time its momentum having carried it 40 feet ahead. “Dying would be too good for him. The guy needs to rot in a Federal jail till he’s old and gray. . . . No money, no silk suits, no girls or fine cars or fancy food or white carpet. . . . And no thugs like Frankie to protect his pretty face.” One more kick and the rock was sent plummeting off the road and down a ravine.

Mitch turned at the sound of an old pickup truck rattling up the road towards him. Coated with dust and grit, it clattered over the washboard road until it pulled alongside. "Hey, Mitch, what you doin' out here," the man said. "You need a lift?"

"Hi, Joseph!" Joseph Brownbear was one of grandpa's long-time friends.

Joseph leaned over to the open window. "I saw your grandpa's truck on the side of the road back a piece. Wondered if maybe those intruders had stolen it."

"Intruders?"

Joseph peered into the young man's eyes. "You don't know?"

A quizzical stare met the old Indian's gaze. "Know what?"

"Cops said he was taken to the hospital. He was beat up or something—still packin' his pistol when the Highway Patrol happened by. Rumor has it, it was a good thing they pulled in when they did or he wouldn't have made it. Guess he had a heart attack too. You didn't know?"

"I must have left just before it happened. Where'd they take him?"

"First to Overton, then somewhere in town. If I knew I'd drop you off. I'm goin' to town myself."

"The convention center will be fine. I'll make a few calls and see if I can locate him."

Running on three hours' sleep, two leftover bagels from the front seat of the sedan, and a stale cup of coffee, Barnes and Horne climbed the stairs to Maggie's porch and rang the bell. Waiting on the doorstep, they discussed the ongoing events of the day. The Highway Patrol had combed the wrecking yard, *with* probable cause, searching for an intruder, they knew didn't exist "thought to have injured the owner, Raymond Wilson." But that was just a front to search. The Ferrari hadn't been found, but in order to search legitimately the Feds needed a warrant. The judge, however, had concluded that as of yet there wasn't enough evidence, and with the owner in the hospital and unable to defend his property, the warrant was denied.

That morning Frankie had been set free on a misdemeanor charge of loitering, while Vinnie wasn't charged with any crime at all. Instead, claiming to be the victim, he'd filed a stolen vehicle report. The health and safety department, meanwhile, had temporarily shut down Three Queens, citing a deplorable lack of emergency lighting.

The front door cracked and a woman eased her face up to the opening. Barnes nodded. "Agent Sutton. . . ."

"Agent Barnes. Horne," she answered in greeting.

"Is she up?" Barnes asked.

Sutton shook her shock of red hair and turned down the corners of her mouth. "She didn't get to sleep until six a.m., about the time I came on shift." She swung open the door and invited the agents inside, Barnes quizzing her about the events—or nonevents—of the night. Then finally he asked, "You told them we're moving them to a safe house yet?"

"They weren't too happy about that," admitted Sutton.

Maggie, carrying a tray with two glasses of orange juice and a plate of muffins, made her way into the living room, bringing Barnes to his feet. "Mrs. Champion, how was your night?" Pleasantries aside, he got right down to business. "I hope you understand, but we need to speak to Mrs. Wilson. . . ."

"The poor girl had a rough night. I'll see if she's awake." She set the tray on a low table in the center of the room. "Please, help yourselves to a muffin. From what I've seen, you gentleman probably haven't had much time for breakfast either." After their hostess had left the room, Agent Sutton turned to Horne. "Rough night?"

"Killer," Horne replied as he peeled a plate from the tray and stuffed a muffin in his mouth.

"Anything on Hale?"

"Nothing," Barnes answered. "And Domenico has our only witness. The name's Ritter." He lifted a muffin and set it on a plate, then took a sip of juice.

"These things are great," Horne mumbled, crumbs still clinging to the corners of his mouth.

"She says they're from an old family recipe. I ate three myself." Sutton turned back to Barnes. "Why don't you bring this Ritter guy back in on obstruction of justice, withholding evidence, or whatever else the legal team can come up with?"

"Domenico would have him back out in an hour. Besides, the arrogant little twit's already been initiated. Domenico's old man used to cut the little finger off some of the members of his 'family' as a warning not to cross him. Ritter, the stupid clown, had his finger wrapped up pretty tight last night. Said the knife slipped while he was carving a roast."

Agent Sutton crinkled her nose. "That's disgusting!"

"He had it coming," Horne said as he set his empty glass on the tray.

"What about the girl—she say anything new?" Barnes asked.

Agent Sutton shook her head. "After last night she'd had about all she could take, and now the old man, too."

"Which old man?" Stephanie, still in a robe, her face creased with sleep wrinkles opposite a nasty bruise on her cheek, stood at the hall door, blinking her swollen eyes and glaring at the agents.

Barnes and Horne both stood; Sutton followed. "Mrs. Wilson," Barnes stuttered. "We'd like to have another talk with you if . . ."

"Which old man?" Stephanie insisted. "Is it Grandpa? Is he okay?"

Barnes shifted nervously on his feet. "Please sit down a minute."

Maggie urged the young woman down into an arm chair. "Here, here," she said in a motherly tone.

The three agents retook their seats, leaning forward awkwardly. "He's at University Medical Center," Barnes continued.

Stephanie gasped. "Is he hurt?"

"He had a heart attack last night. He's resting comfortably now."

"I need to see him." Stephanie started to get up.

"We'll have Agent Sutton take you there, but please, we need to ask you a few questions first." Reluctantly, Stephanie eased back in her seat and closed her eyes. Barnes, knowing time was short, got right to the point. "Last night, it was Mitch here in the house, wasn't it?"

Stephanie looked at Maggie, crouching at her side, wondering whether or not to tell the truth. Then she peered back over at Barnes. "Yes." Maggie, raised her eyebrows. "He came to tell me I wasn't safe. He told me a terrible man was looking for me. It was the man you arrested last night, wasn't it?"

"We arrested someone who'd been watching the house. We think your husband set him up to be caught."

A faint smile settled over the younger woman's lips. "He told me he did that once to . . ." She stopped in her tracks.

"Did what?" Barnes asked.

"Nothing."

"We can't help if you keep withholding information, Mrs. Wilson. What did he do?"

Maintaining a straight face, Stephanie replied simply, "I heard an explosion. My guess is, the poor man's muffler fell off."

“A simple potato bomb,” Barnes muttered. “But I’ve never seen one work like that. It knocked the guy silly.”

“Was he someone who could hurt me?”

“Yes.”

“Mitch wouldn’t have done anything illegal unless he was protecting me.” Stephanie’s voice faltered and she put her hand on Maggie’s. “It doesn’t matter what you think he did. I’m sure when the truth comes out you’ll find Mitch didn’t kill anyone.”

“What did he tell you, Mrs Wilson?”

“That’s it.”

“‘That’s it’? That’s all he said? ‘I love you . . . there’s a terrible man out front . . . I didn’t kill anyone’—that’s all? Look, we’ve got to find him before he gets himself killed. Do you know where he is?”

Stephanie shook her head. “He wouldn’t be hiding unless he’s in trouble. And he wouldn’t be doing your job if *you* were doing it!” She stood up. “Now I want to go see Grandpa.”

“Sit down!” Barnes yelled. He was tired—exhausted, really—and simply too exasperated to hammer back through all the formalities.

Stephanie, stunned, did as she was told. A leaden uneasiness settled over the room. The highly-trained agent, the professional investigator, had just lost his cool. After what seemed like several minutes had passed, Barnes fixed his steeliest gaze on Stephanie and said calmly, “Mrs. Wilson, this isn’t a game. . . . You knew Mike, didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Stephanie’s answer was wooden, emotionless.

“We think he’s dead. We have a witness that claims he knows where Mike’s body is.”

Stephanie lifted a hand to her mouth. “You think Mitch had something to do with Mike’s death?”

“Mrs. Wilson,” Barnes continued, ratcheting up his interrogation, “we found blood in your driveway that matches Mike’s blood type. We found your car inside a building that burned to the ground—a building belonging to a very dangerous man—and, what’s left of the organic substance in the trunk of the burnt car, our lab is trying to determine if it’s blood residue. We have your ex-neighbor, Andy Kostecki, trying to strike a deal with us in order to get his tail out of an attempted rape charge. And we have reason to believe that Al Kostecki was being paid to watch you. Everything points to a very, very wicked man who would like to get his hands on you and your husband. . . . Now I’ll ask

you again: *Where's Mitch?*"

Jettisoning her defenses, Stephanie murmured, "I really don't know. He didn't say."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wilson. Your husband is in serious trouble. I witnessed him stealing the car belonging to the man that this all points to. Rumor has it he has a contract out on Mitch. Can you understand our urgency?"

"Yes, but I don't know where he is," Stephanie repeated, beginning to sob.

"We can help you both—if he'll agree to come in and help us."

"I don't know where he is." Her face was buried in her hands.

"Okay, okay." Barnes lowered his voice and drew closer. "But will you tell us if he contacts you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to have to put you through all this," he said, reaching up and touching her arm.

Stephanie pulled away and lifted her head. "I'd like to get dressed and go see Grandpa now."

Barnes stood. "We're finished." He stepped towards the door. "Thank you for the juice and muffins, Mrs Champion."

Horne stood to follow. "Very good muffins."

Pausing at the door, Barnes spun back around. "We're the good guys, Mrs. Wilson. We don't want to see you or your husband get hurt." And with that the two male agents were out the door.

The Alley Team gathered in a circle on the floor, legs crossed and arms folded, ready for war.

"At was a lot t' say, Smitty," said Nurse, once the guessing game had come to an end. "You an' Lightnin' had one heck of a night. You think he might a' been lassoed by the law?"

Smitty nodded as Nurse added, "There ain't much our little bunch can do now 'cept keep movin' forward. We got to get ahold a' that gun so's we can keep 'at boy outta prison."

"First we've got to get you a set of teeth and your bandages off," Greg piped in. "Someone needs to do a little shopping, too."

The old woman, a squeamish look on her face, quickly changed the subject. "Sound, your friend from th' T-bird heard from Ritter yet?"

"Not a word. Of course, I didn't tell him where we're staying. For

all I know, he could have shown up sometime last night or even this morning . . .”

“AWOL!” cried Cap’n. “The private took an injury in battle and he’s gone and bailed out on us. Court marshal him, try him for treason. He’s up to no good, sure as some sneakin’ double agent. Don’t take two days to get no broken hand fixed.”

The old woman raised a calming hand. “Settle down, Cap’n. We don’t know if’n he bailed, no more ‘an we know if’n Lightnin’s been captured.”

“Excuse me,” Greg interrupted. “We’ve got some serious plans to review. If we hope to pull it off, every detail will need to be perfect. Every base has got to be covered.” Sound raised his hand like a school child asking to go to the restroom. “What are we going to do without Lightning?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Greg said. Sound’s hand rose high in the air again. “Yes,” Greg mumbled, a bit irritated.

“I know someone that can get us fake IDs.”

Greg shook his head. “No, we’ve got to go through Vinnie. Everything needs to land squarely back in his lap. It’s the only way we can take him down.”

Once more Sound waved his hand in Greg’s face.

“Sound, we’re not in school. You don’t need to raise your hand.”

“Oh, sorry. I just get carried away.” Sound bit nervously on his thumb nail.

“So what did you want to say?”

Head swaying side to side and shoulders hunched, Sound replied, “I forgot.”

“Okay, then . . .”

“Oh, oh, I remember,” Sound cut in. He began to raise his hand, then caught himself and dropped it in his lap. “How are we going to find the new location of Mr. Vinnie’s shop?”

Greg groaned in frustration and sighed, “That’s why we’re reviewing everything again.”

“Sorry.” Sound pressed two fingers to his lips and sat back to listen.

THIRTY-EIGHT

THE DUSTY CHEVY SQUEAKED to a stop and Mitch stepped to the curb. “Thanks, Joseph. I wasn’t looking forward to the walk.” “It was good to see you, Mitch. Ray never stops talking about you when I see him. When you find him, you tell him I’ll feed his dogs until he’s back on his feet. And good luck with those twins.” The old Indian pulled away.

Mitch entered the convention center and made his way through the crowded Home Expo and Garden Show. Finding a bank of phones at one end of the hall, he located the number to the hospital in the phone book and punched it in.

“Hello. Do you have a patient named Raymond Wilson? . . .”

After feeding the slot a pocketful of change, the call finally was put through to the right room. The ensuing conversation was short and to the point.

“You okay?” Mitch asked.

“Fine.”

“What can I do?”

“You take care of business. I’ll be outta here in a day or two.”

“Joseph said he’d feed the dogs.”

“Good. . . . Couple a’ government boys came by. Your package is still safe.”

A flicker of a smile had crossed Mitch’s face before he was able to extinguish it. “One of his thugs got to Stef. She’s a little beat up, but seems okay.”

“Hell’s bells! He’s got no sense of a fair fight, does he?”

“None. But I think we’ve about brought him to his knees.”

“Good. You don’t go worryin’ none about me, ya’ hear? The old ticker still has a good fight or two left in it. Now get off the phone and stop botherin’ me. I got some nurse tellin’ me I can’t even get outta

bed t' hit the john."

"I love you."

"You too, boy. Be careful."

Mitch hung up the line and, flipping impatiently through the phone book, dialed a new number.

"Three Queens," a pleasant voice answered.

"Mr. Domenico," Mitch said.

"I'm sorry, Mr Domenico's not available."

"Is he in the building?"

"I don't know, sir, this is a temporary answering service."

"A temporary service? Why?"

"I think the hotel is having some trouble with their phones."

Mitch smiled. *Maybe the power outage caused more damage than just a few lights out.* "Will you leave Mr. Domenico a message?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell him . . ." Mitch hesitated.

"Sir?"

"Tell him Mitch called. I didn't find the package he promised, but I'll deliver his car, washed and waxed, by the end of the week."

"Is there a number where you can be reached?"

"Tell Mr. Domenico I have *his* number, and it's almost up."

"Yes, sir."

"Would you make sure to underline the word *his*?"

"Um . . . okay."

Watching his back, Mitch snaked back through the crowds and down the street toward the Las Vegas Hilton. Across the fountains and lawns, past the residential roof tops, his gaze fell on the apartment building where his friends were harbored. *Poor Smitty will be in a panic by now,* he thought as he jogged past row upon row of cars.

She was like a shadow, constantly following two steps behind. She wasn't rude, intrusive, or overly talkative, just always there. It was a cop's job, and Agent Sutton did it well. Keeping her vigil in Maggie's living room, she checked the doors on a regular basis and made radio contact nearly every hour. She shared with Stephanie her experience with being a sentry. The danger of them being attacked had dropped considerably since the potato bomb and subsequent arrest of Frankie Domenico the night before—a fact that made Stephanie feel both bet-

ter and worse, all at the same time.

The women packed their suitcases. After visiting the hospital, their next stop would be a safe-house for a few days.

The threesome squeezed into the elevator and ascended the five floors to the cardiac unit. From well outside the room where the crotchety old junkyard dog was being kenneled, Stephanie could hear his fearsome barks. Upon entering the room, they found his bed empty. The sound of Grandpa's voice could be heard snarling through the bathroom door, which stood slightly ajar. "I've stood on my own two feet to urinate for more than 70 years," it resonated. "So I don't need some pretty face tellin' me to sit down, then standin' there watchin' me while I do it."

"Alright, Mr. Wilson. Sit down . . . that's it. . . . I'll be right outside the door. Just let me know when you're finished."

"I'll finish when I damn well please! Now get out—I can piss on my own."

A nurse in her mid-thirties stepped through the doorway and drew the door partway closed. Noticing the sheepish gazes on the faces of the visitors in the room, she shrugged her shoulders in a chagrined apology and went about her work.

"I'll be in the hall," stammered Agent Sutton. Then she made an about face and marched out the door to seek refuge in a nearby waiting area.

Maggie shifted nervously on her feet, as if she too wanted to bolt. "Do you think I should wait out there?" she asked in a docile whisper.

"Oh, no," laughed Stephanie, only slightly mortified by the old man's gruffness. "He's all bark and no bite. Come and sit down. I want you to meet him."

Maggie took a seat as far away from the bathroom as possible. After a minute had passed, the toilet flushed. "Alright," he barked curtly, "come on in and help me with this ridiculous mess of gadgets."

The RN eased open the door and disappeared through the opening. Another minute went by before Grandpa emerged, hunched over, totting a pole loaded down with tubes and bags. The white hair at the back of his head was matted down; elsewhere it stood every which way. He hobbled along, old and frail-looking, his white, bony legs poking out like toothpicks from under the skimpy hospital robe.

At once upon seeing Stephanie, the old man stood erect and his face shone with joy. "My land, girl, it's good t' see ya'. I just felt the

old ticker fire up inside.” He reached out to greet her.

The nurse followed behind, a portable monitor in tow. “It sure did,” she protested, looking down at the wavy lines. “And if you don’t settle down we’ll make her leave.”

The old man brushed aside the threat. “Don’t pay no attention to Sarah, here. She’s been tryin’ to tell me what to do all morning.” Stephanie gave him a gentle hug. “Stars, girl, your arms broken? Ya’ haven’t given me a pat like that since the second time I met ya’.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.” She meted out a second, more fervent embrace.

“Ain’t no hurt in that, just pure love,” he chided, one bushy arm wrapped around Stephanie, the other grasping onto the metal tube at his side. “Just what I need t’ get out of this place, some beauty t’ warm me up. Now, let me have a look at ya’.”

Stephanie took a step back, trying to hide her bruised cheek. “Look at *you*,” she cajoled, rotating her face to the side. “Ornery as that pack of dogs you keep around. Now you stop barking at the nurses. They’re just trying to help you.”

Grandpa reached over and gently drew the girl’s cheek back towards him. “One a’ them boys hurt my girl,” he muttered under his breath. “He told me they did.”

“You’ve talked to . . .”

“Shh,” he stifled her words. Then he looked over at Maggie, who sat meekly in the corner of the room.

“Oh, Grandpa, this is my good friend Maggie Champion. Don’t worry, she knows everything I know. I’d trust her with my life.”

Maggie nodded and waited for Grandpa to finish. “He called me an hour ago,” he said quietly. “He’s fine. Just got a score to settle so the two of you can be safe. Told me everything a few nights ago when you came by. Didn’t want to worry you with it, is all. He’s a smart boy, but he did a dumb thing, and I can guarantee it’ll be the last secret he’ll ever keep from you. When he gets a chance, he’ll clear the whole thing up.”

The nurse interrupted. “You’d better lay back down, Mr. Wilson.”

“See, there she goes again, bossin’ me around like Norma used t’ do. . . .”

His arms pinned to his sides by Smitty’s vicelike bear hug, Mitch

assured his exuberant friend that everything was just fine. "I just ran out of gas, is all. I'm sorry you had to worry." Smitty was bent over with his head resting on Mitch's chest, both gangly arms still wrapped around his hero. "Where is everyone?" Mitch continued, slightly flustered by all the attention.

Smitty rocked back and slowly loosened his grip. By interpreting his array of hand signals, Mitch was made aware that Sunny had gone off with Nurse to get her a new set of teeth, then to the eye doctor, and finally to stop at the hospital to see how Eddie was feeling; Cap'n was off grocery shopping; Ritter was still who knows where; and Sound was out rounding up a used television set and VCR. Nurse and Greg had given explicit instructions that if Mitch returned, he was supposed to take a crack at Bino—see if he'd had enough of Mr. Vinnie and would lend them a hand.

The entire guess-that-word ordeal took nearly 20 minutes, and by then Mitch was dog-tired. "I've got to get some shut-eye, Smitty," he said when the lopsided conversation ended. "Will you keep an eye out?"

Smitty, punster to the end, nodded and sent one eye bulging from its socket, scrunching up his cheek in a smile.

Mitch laughed. "Smitty, you're one of a kind. When we get finished with all this I'm going to have Grandpa teach you how to paint. You're a good guy to have around." Slapping the man's gangly shoulder, he added, "And you need to teach me how to crack a lock." With that, Mitch was off for a quick shower, a shave, and a lengthy snooze.

Someone was calling his name. The puffy-eyed old fighter lay in his hospital bed, blinking away the too-bright overhead lights and struggling to focus on the face that went with the voice. Both were vaguely familiar, the voice more so than the face. The room was empty except for another patient, eyes shut, in the adjacent bunk. "Eddie, Eddie, you sleepin'?"

"Nurse?"

"It's me, but for now I goes by Mrs. Lambert."

"Nurse?" Eddie blinked again.

"Shh—you expectin' th' queen a' England?"

"Nurse . . . what in the—the blind stars happened to you? You look like you won the odds on a three round bout."

"Shh, I'm goin' incognito," she grinned. "Can't no one know I was here."

"Incognito? What in the name a' Pete you doin'?"

"Someone's got t' put Mr. Vinnie outta business. May as well be me. He th' one that hurt ya'?"

Eddie rolled his head to the side and squinted over at his dormant roommate. "I ain't told nobody about nothin' yet. Still can't remember a thing." He winked one eye.

"I seen that."

"What?"

"You winkin', you ol' codger."

Eddie forced open his eye and squinted past the makeup, hairdo and new dress. What'd you do to your eyes, old woman?"

"Had 'em fixed. Feel like a yard a' sand been dumped right out a' 'em. An' you look just like I 'member, 'cept now you're older 'an ever."

Eddie stared up at his old friend. "And you look ten years younger. What in the tar you up to, an' where'd you get the money?"

"Compliments a' Mr. Vinnie. Don't ask—it's a long story."

"You on his train, too?"

"Eddie, you knows me better 'an 'at."

"So how'd you get ahold a' his money?" Eddie let out a soft moan as he rolled up onto his elbow and raised his head.

"Some sort a' bet involvin' a young feller you ain't never met. He's part a' th' family for a bit." Nurse gave an annoyed little grunt. "Now shut your trap an' listen a season so's I can tell ya' what I got t' say."

Eddie lay his head back onto the pillow and kept blinking his eyes. He was glad to be back among the living.

"This here plan just might help get your Clint off Mr. Vinnie's train, if'n he didn't do nothin' real dumb. Think he might be willin' t' help?"

Eddie's reply came out in a series of disjointed sentences. "His mother asked him to . . . to come home and try to work things out with . . . his old man. By the look in his eye, I'd say yes, he'll help, even though his lips might say no. My money says he's been knocked a blow or two by Vinnie." The old man lowered his voice. "That's how I fell. Vinnie found my book—told Clint they were going to help me take a final fall. Clint agreed, at first, but I been doin' a lot of thinkin'. He might've been tryin' to keep me out of Vinnie's way. But I still ain't sure—just ain't sure."

"Well, we just got to *make* sure, now, don't we?" declared Nurse. "Th'

boy still might have some time comin' from the law."

Eddie shrugged. "Might do him some good. Who knows, maybe his daddy'll come here and defend his son for a change."

Nurse began to explain the plan's every detail. Eddie listened intently, grunting and groaning with each labored movement. Finally the nurse on the new shift entered and said, "How are you feeling tonight, Mr. Alders?"

"I'd be lots better if I had a roommate that didn't snore. Can't get a wink a' sleep."

Nurse picked up her handbag. "Time I'll be goin' now. You do like I tol' ya', hear?" She pulled out a small photo and laid it on the bed, next to Eddie.

"Thank you for stopping by, Mrs. Lambert," said Eddie in his most priggish voice. "It was nice visiting with you again." Nurse smiled a toothless sneer, hitched up her slip and flounced from the room.

Mitch awoke from his long nap to find himself alongside three stooges, all staring at a used video player/TV set showing the classic film "My Fair Lady." Smitty sat cross-legged, elbows resting on his knees, his large chin in his hands. Cap'n slouched up against the wall like he was half asleep. While Sound, exercising perfect posture, sat closest to the flickering screen, legs crossed and hands resting on his thighs. All three sat mesmerized, fascinated by the colorful characters and amusing plot. "*The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain . . .*"

"You guys enjoying the show?" Mitch asked. Not a one of them turned to look his way. It was as if none of them had ever seen a video in their lives. "Excuse me . . . I'm headed out."

Sound glanced up for only a second, then riveted his eyes back on the screen. "Okay, be careful," is all he said. He raised one hand in a listless goodbye, his eyes refusing to stray again from the tube.

Mitch started off to catch the bus. Transportation never seemed a problem for the Alley Team. Nurse had instructed the new members on the fine art of free bus rides, the best way to get around, seeing as how they lived so close to the convention center. Mitch strode through the bus-drop entrance and examined the route map. The closest stop to his destination would be the Econo Lodge on Charleston. From there he'd catch a city bus to Rancho, ride past the Husky, and exit at Coran. If Bino's marine-cut, tattooed, boxer-dog-walking, cigar-smoking, busy-body of a neighbor wasn't on trailer park patrol, Mitch would be

sitting in Bino's easy chair when he came home from work.

The travel plan went off without a hitch. As the bus roared by the run-down service station, Mitch caught a glimpse of Bino's car, parked in back next to the fuel tanks. Mitch checked the time: 7:00 p.m. Thirteen minutes later he was scaling Bino's squeaky steps and forcing a credit card behind the latch of the sloppy-fitting door.

The hour wait seemed more like a day. Mitch sat in the dark, stale room, his mind wandering to and fro, at times coming to roost on some of the most brutal memories, then fluttering on to other, equally powerful images of such incredible love and kindness. The scenes flashed mindlessly on the insides of his eyelids: Brutality, marriage, deceit, sonograms, new life, certain death, hope, despair, exhaustion, love.

He closed his eyes, visualizing the early days of his and Stephanie's relationship. At first it was only a far-fetched dream. The convicted-felon boy from the junkyard marrying the daughter of a wealthy, influential political figure. He'd never allow it—and they both knew it. So their dates were kept casual, low-key. She'd creep from the house—or sometimes outright lie to her parents about where she'd be. But the lies and the creeping around only made things worse. After a few months her outraged parents had forbidden her to see him.

When Stephanie turned 18, the gloves had come off. With no more legal power over their daughter, her parents began to take away the material benefits of living in a wealthy home. The effect had actually catalyzed the opposite reaction. Stephanie desperately needed love and understanding, and Mitch knew how to give both.

Soon they'd become more than close friends. Stephanie would tell him everything. He happily listened, all the while dreaming of spending the rest of his life with his angelic bride-to-be. It had taken her a full three weeks to get up the nerve to tell her parents she was engaged; even then it was by accident, when one day she forgot to take off the diamond ring Mitch had given her.

The pop-popping of not-to-distant gunfire jolted Mitch back to reality, and the smelly, oppressively muggy surroundings of the confined trailer, which had baked all day in the hot desert sun. Mitch got up to pace. Each time he ambled past the kitchen window the trailer would rock. Each step sent a shiver down the flimsy floorboards. He paused by the water-spotted glass, peering down the narrow drive. Bino didn't really pose any threat. The poor man had been hiding behind booze and

cigarettes and a wild lifestyle so long, perhaps he was more afraid of living than of dying. The same could be said of his other deep-seated fears, the fears of commitment, love, friendship. Perhaps Bino's hollow existence provided a comfortable shelter from having to deal with the reality of standing for something worthwhile.

Mitch sunk back into the lumpy easy chair and pondered the circumstances that had brought him to his own such identity crisis. It had started with a wrong decision and just a little deception—nothing a few hours with the police probably couldn't have cleared up. But, no, he was too proud for that, too pig-headed. Thought he could solve his own problems. And before long one stupid little mistake was compounded by another bigger one. . . .

Outside, a car's honking mingled with the mindless laughter of teens, amplifying the black stillness and caged quality of the trailer. Tires squealed on warm asphalt, followed by the mechanical sound of hydraulics. As the car outside was launched skyward, its lights cast pale shadows across the wall opposite the windows, reminding Mitch of the reason he was there. He harkened back to his last visit with Bino. Seeking a simple loan, his petition had been denied. Then just hours later commenced the nightmare of death and destruction. Vinnie had spread it thick, a generous layer of suffocating grease along his slippery path. And now, after a series of wrong decisions and bad luck mixed with a trace of good, he'd been hurled into a deadly game of roulette.

The distinctive sound of Bino's Audi pulling up the gravel drive made Mitch sit up. He crossed his legs and slumped back in the chair. The porch boards groaned out on the landing; keys jangled. The door sprang inward and Bino's bent figure skulked through the opening. The Audi's keys landed on a stack of stereo boxes nearest the door, then the dim light flickered on. Bino turned and groped with his oxygen hose, detaching it from the portable bottle he carried around.

"Mike's dead," murmured Mitch from the shadows.

Bino wrenched around and gasped for a breath. Fumbling to switch the hose to the larger compressor, he sucked in a shallow breath of wind and said, "You've come . . . to the wrong place."

"I don't think so."

"It's over, Mitch."

"What's over?"

"It's not just me . . . anymore. He'll hurt . . . my daughter, too."

“What does he have on you?” Mitch suddenly began to feel sorry for the washed-up gambler, still disoriented and panting for air. In the same instant he hated him, hated the blatant indecision and cowardice and corruption that he represented. Mitch pulled himself up out of the recliner and patted its cushion. “Here,” he insisted.

Bino straightway embraced the comfort it offered. The single chair was again dragged from the kitchen.

“What’s he got over you?” Mitch repeated.

Bino took several rapid breaths and measured his words. “Jimmy was a friend . . . of mine,” he began. “He got . . . a nice job from . . . the new landlord that . . . bought . . . Carson’s Auto Body. . . . Sort of ran the place. . . . I had a few . . . gambling debts I couldn’t . . . seem to shake. That’s when . . . Jimmy introduced me . . . to the man.”

“Vinnie?”

Bino nodded. After another smattering of quick breaths, he continued. “My debts were gone . . . but my bondage . . . had just begun. I didn’t . . . own my life anymore. . . . I worked for Vinnie . . . instead.” Bino paused.

“I figured.”

“Like I said . . . Jimmy and I were friends. . . . I was ticked . . . that he sucked me in. . . . We argued about it . . . a few times. He was . . . jammed up, just like . . . me, with his own bag . . . of skeletons. So I made a call . . . to a friend in Utah.”

“Mike?”

“Yeah, Mike. . . . We went to . . . the academy together.”

“You were a cop?”

“Los Angeles. Took the fast-track . . . to a promotion and . . . went back home to Vegas . . . with the rest of the . . . police family. One problem. . . . Fast-track promotions . . . came with . . . a price. You worked the ghettos . . . of L.A., you . . . played the gamble. Mine . . . was courage. My . . . partner’s brains . . . got sprayed across . . . my new blue . . . uniform.” Bino sputtered for air. “A . . . few months at a desk . . . and the word . . . from the shrink came . . . that I was unstable. . . . They put me . . . on the flat-foot . . . parking violation patrol. . . . No gun, no honor . . . and no disability for . . . my job-related . . . *mental* injuries. Nothing.”

“I had no idea.”

“Nobody does. . . . I tried a few . . . security jobs, some odds . . . and ends; married . . . about twelve years ago . . . had a daughter. . . . Then

came the . . . meltdown. . . . Couldn't take the heat . . . of the responsible life." The skinny man faltered again, ambushed by a series of wheezes. When they tapered off, he went on. "Mike *did* make the . . . fast-track. Ended up in . . . Provo, where his . . . family was from. Landed a sweet . . . FBI job . . . doing cushy work—white-collar . . . stuff. Made his way . . . up the ladder, and then . . . one day I called him . . . out of the blue. . . . His old man had owned . . . a body shop. I gave . . . him enough info on . . . Vinnie that he . . . convinced his boss to . . . let him come down here . . . and help the locals . . . take a crack at Vinnie. . . . Not a big priority. . . . Stolen cars from . . . one state to another. But . . . a connection to the . . . mob in Jersey, that's . . . what got the ball rolling."

"Vinnie does have real connections?"

"Can't get . . . any bigger. His uncle's been trying . . . to clean up his own . . . gangster image. Owns . . . the whole block . . . that Three Queens sits on . . . and another 40- . . . or 50 million dollars worth . . . of property around . . . the city. The Husky's . . . just a drop in the bucket. . . . The real Mr. Domenico . . . has been selling off . . . his assets in Jersey . . . with the idea of creating . . . for himself a new life . . . in Vegas. . . . He sent Vinnie here . . . to get the block ready . . . for a new hotel. . . . But Vinnie . . . thinks he can cash in—wants . . . to skim a little off . . . the top first."

"Why aren't the Feds squeezing you like a wet sponge?"

"They've been by . . . to see me. Mike wouldn't . . . divulge his source. . . . He promised to keep me . . . out of it."

"So what exactly does Vinnie have on you?"

"The bullet holes . . . in the Ferrari? They were . . . put there by me. . . . The first time I'd shot . . . a gun in twenty years. . . . Vinnie had to hold . . . a gun to *my* head to . . . get me to do it. . . . To him . . . it was just a game. . . ."

"Big deal—you're afraid to shoot guns."

"Problem is . . . the same gun killed . . . Jimmy. . . . Has my prints on it . . . and the Feds . . . have a perfect match. . . . All they need now . . . is the gun Vinnie keeps . . . tucked away for a . . . rainy day. Mike was . . . trying to figure out . . . how to get me out . . . from under it. He . . . always was a hot-shot. . . . I guess it's what . . . got him . . . killed."

"And it's what put me in the same boat as you."

"Damn, kid, I'm . . . sorry."

"The gun I took from the drunk that night. . . . I left it in the Camaro. Your car thief took it and gave it to Vinnie. He shot Mike point blank with that

gun, then he knelt and shot him again. . . .” Mitch, still sorting it all out in his mind, stole his own breath of air. “In order to implicate me, he dumped Mike’s body in the trunk of Stef’s car.”

Bino’s hands shook as he wrested a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. “I’m sure sorry,” he said again. He slapped the pack against his hand and peeled the wrapper from its top. “Once Vinnie owns you . . . the only way out . . . is a bullet. That’s what . . . Jimmy wanted to do. . . . Just get out.”

Mitch grimaced. “Vinnie thinks the whole thing’s a game, doesn’t he?”

“He’s got his own . . . problems to worry about. . . . His uncle shipped him . . . out here to keep him . . . out of trouble . . . back home. . . . Vinnie’s like a son . . . to him. Ever since his . . . old man got . . . whacked, Mr. Domenico’s . . . taken Vinnie . . . under his skirts. . . . Frankie keeps Vinnie . . . in line—in a funny . . . sort of way.” Bino paused to light up.

“Vinnie told me he killed his old man himself.”

Bino gave a shrug. “Wouldn’t surprise me. . . . His old man . . . was the mob’s . . . main hit man.” Smoke spewed from Bino’s nose and mouth. “See, if Vinnie . . . gets caught gambling again . . . his uncle will . . . whack *him*. Vinnie’s got . . . a habit as bad . . . as mine. . . . If the old man . . . told him to, Frankie . . . would whack . . . Vinnie in a heartbeat. . . . But the guy’s too dumb . . . to cover his tracks.”

Mitch sat in feverish thought, the wheels of gangster justice already in motion. “I’ve got a way to take him down.”

“Ain’t been done . . . in forty years of . . . the family’s rule. . . . But my bet is . . . if anyone can do it . . . you can. What can . . . I do to help?”

“Why should I trust *you*?”

Bino took a long drag on his smoke. Letting it out in choppy puffs, he said, “You can’t. . . . With my daughter’s life . . . at stake now . . . there’s no telling . . . what I’ll do. . . . I *can* tell you . . . though . . . where I think . . . your car is.”

THIRTY-NINE

IT WASN'T QUITE AN EMPTY SHELL, rather, it was more an animal carcass, from which the callous hunter had stripped the best cuts of meat and left the remains to the vultures—or to the health and building departments, to be exact. And now the building was slowly but surely being plucked clean to the bone by a loose band of dishonest guards who weren't sure if a job would still exist once the smoke cleared. Two squirming maggots wearing Three Queens name badges on their shirts shuffled on the bone-white carpet of the 13th floor, listening to the obscenities of a crazed tyrant—and ready to take orders from that very same tyrant. It was their hope to feast on the left-over scraps.

Three Queens had been sold for the value of the land only. The bank saw the crumbling building more as an encumbrance. Just like its prior owners had insulated themselves from the responsibility of the massive repairs needed to bring it up to code, Vinnie had opted to do the same. Over the previous two years Vinnie had neglected even the most basic maintenance, concentrating instead on his own greedy agenda. Finally, threatened with a million dollars' worth of repair work, he chose to shut it down.

Several of the casino's patrons were already posturing to sue. A broken ankle here, a fractured wrist there, some jewelry missing from the front desk, three purses stolen—all tort claims for mental anguish and spoiled vacations. A second round of larger, hungrier vultures had also gathered to feed on the hysteria of a possible settlement that might be gained before a class-action suit swung into full gear.

Vinnie stormed back and forth across the carpet, hovering about like a waiting raven hoping to filch his own a small morsel before being ripped to shreds by the real bird of prey—an impetuous uncle yet unaware of the building's present status. The second option, one in which there at least existed the possibility of coming off victorious, was to clash with the hunter without a gun, whose name the gangster now took in vain, along with other

choice expletives.

"One lousy kid, screwin' up my life. . . . Walked right in under our noses and stole my car . . . leaves a message sayin' my 'number's up' . . . takes Frankie's car out with five cents worth a' potato, then knocks me across the parking lot on my . . ." Clint took a gulp of his drink as he listened to the tyrant's vulgarities continue, "and I end up with an FBI agent's gun pointed at me . . . and the kid's still got twenty-grand a' my cash." He brandished a fist in the faces of his two lackeys as a demonstration of his authority. "You find him," he growled, "or I'll finish the both of you with a bullet between your eyes!" A potent kick sent a nude figurine crashing to the floor. He stared down one of his loyal employees. "And bring Gino and the boys in from Jersey!"

Unnerved by the fixed glare, Clint flicked the gelled hair from his eyes and turned away. Frankie, slouched at attention at Clint's side, swiped his thumb across his nose and asked, "Don't Bino know where t' find this Mitch guy?"

Vinnie's lower lip quivered imperceptibly. "Maybe, maybe not," he finally said. "But if you find his daughter, we'll make sure he does. . . ." The wise guy glanced around. "And where'd that runt of an Englishman go?"

The Feds were asking themselves the same question. Ritter had disappeared. The one, shaky connection to the whereabouts of Mike's body, a homeless, pennyless vagrant, had managed to get himself bailed out, land a new job, obtain a new wardrobe, and vanish—all in less than 24 hours. And all for the price of a measly pinky.

Barnes had come into the SAC's office to deliver the news. "The car's got to be stashed someplace in his grandpa's wrecking yard. The old man's anti-government all the way. Took on the transportation department thirty years ago and won. He won't be of any help."

Field brushed off the speculation. "To me that's a moot point," he replied. "I'm not as concerned about the car as I am Mike's body. Did you get the tap on Mrs. Champion's phone?"

"We did, but we were too late with the hospital tap. Our nurse did report that Mr. Wilson got a call a little after noon. She was sure it was Mitch by the way the old man talked. Then when Stephanie stopped by to visit, he confirmed it. We found Mr. Wilson's truck on the old Pecos highway 25 miles north of town. It was out of fuel, with Mitch's prints all over it."

"You think the boy killed Mike?" Field asked.

"I doubt it. I'd have to see his prints on the weapon. Even then we might have some burden of guilt to prove."

"What do you mean?"

"Mike was adamant the kid's a good man. Put it in his reports." Barnes's head gave a slight shake. "I'm afraid I screwed this one up, sir. Mike was right, we should've brought Mitch in. The armed robbery thing may have taken place while Mitch was trying to prevent a suicide. We've located the driver's wife. It took some doing because the old car had been sitting in the backyard of a friend of a friend. The fellow's name is Greg Hart."

"The name sounds familiar."

"You remember the two-hundred-thousand-dollar credit card case a few months back? Guy claimed he was a victim? The story was in all the news."

"I remember. The hotel came up with a tape of him with a hooker." Field slid his glasses up his nose.

"Greg Hart."

"Poor jerk."

Barnes held up his pages of notes. "Lost everything. Job, house, wife, home; his second mortgage was sold on the courthouse steps. We've talked to his father. Seems his gun is missing. We found Hart's wallet in the kid's Camaro; no gun, though. And one interesting fact: the hooker works for Vincent Domenico."

"You find her?"

"Not yet."

"You told me Mitch, in both cases, had left the guns behind?"

"He did," confirmed Barnes. "But there's more. His dad killed himself when the kid was seven years old. Mitch is the one who found him. Ugly scene. Mother couldn't take it and broke down. His grandpa was awarded custody. Turns out the kid's luck isn't so good. As a high-school senior the Vegas police arrested him on an armed felon charge. He cooperated and got a year. I've looked over all the statements—Mitch was innocent. Drove the get-away car and didn't even know what was happening until it was too late. Far as I'm concerned, he shouldn't have been busted at all. A Sterling scholar, captain of the basketball team . . . he could have had a full ride anyplace in the country. The arrest squashed all that."

Field gripped the corners of his spectacles and drew them up on his forehead. Then he massaged the outside corners of his eyes. A migraine's aftermath, the remnants of which often lingered on for hours, wasn't that

much better than the actual thing. “But he can’t be the perfectly innocent kid you think he is. He stole a car the other night, we’ve got tapes of him setting off the fire alarm in Three Queens, he kidnapped a guard, and so on and so forth. . . .”

“Word on the street is,” Barnes said, referring once more to his notes, “Vinnie’s been running a credit card scam in the basement of Eddie’s Gym. A bunch of homeless people dug Eddie out of a wall in the laundry chute a few days ago. The old boxer’s as tight lipped as Mr. Wilson.”

Horne stuck his head in the doorway, a smirk across his face. “We got him.”

“Who?” Barnes and Field exclaimed in unison.

“Mike’s contact. . . .” Horne paused. Finally they’d gotten a break. “Bino Daniels. He was a rookie cop in L.A. Graduated from the same academy, same year, as Mike.”

“What are you waiting for? Bring him in. He know’s a far sight more than he’s telling us.” Field brought his glasses back down onto the bridge of his nose and waved the agents out the door.

An hour of arguing hadn’t changed the old woman’s mind. Nurse was not about to go around reciting *The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain*, no matter what anyone said. She was perfectly happy with the way she spoke and there was nothing wrong with her southern accent. If the team didn’t like it, they were just “hog-tied naked to a hornet’s nest and drippin’ with molasses”—end of discussion.

Sound had taken the time to hook up the television to the antenna, and now he and Smitty sat watching the late night news. Cap’n was unshakably asleep in the corner, snoring like a Bradley tank. Milling about the apartment, Greg and Nurse were trying to avoid speaking to each other after their petty spat about the need for speech lessons. In time, both wandered into the little kitchen to whip up a bite to eat.

“Hey, come see this,” Sound yelled. “Congressman MacArthur had his identity stolen and was arrested today on drug charges.”

Greg vaulted from the kitchen and concentrated on the screen. Nurse waddled behind, still blinking furiously from the irritation to her eyes. A news reporter thrust her microphone—among many others—in front of a man standing on the front walk of the county jail.

“This is an outrage!” the man scoffed, his voice resonating over the TV. “I was treated like a common criminal.” The man was well dressed, though

disheveled. His jacket hung over one arm, his presumed wife hung on the other, her face a bleak mask. A distinguished attorney lurked in the shadows, practically hanging onto his client's shirt tails.

"Congressman MacArthur," one of the reporters shouted, "are you saying the charges are false?"

"I'm not only stating unequivocally that the charges are false but that the arrest should never have happened. My office will get to the bottom of this. And when it does, heads are going to roll."

The news anchor appeared on the screen. "That was the scene earlier today at the county jail," he said, a look of concern creasing his face. "We have since learned that the drug charges stemmed from a Florida warrant for this man, Roy Higgins, a resident of Porterville, California." A photo flashed on the screen. "Allegedly, Higgins had been posing as Congressman Dalton MacArthur. From the information we have received, he has ties to Las Vegas and has left a trail of illegal credit card charges and speeding tickets in the congressman's name from California to Florida. . . . We now take you live to Congressman MacArthur's home."

"Thank you, Phil," said the dark-haired, on-the-scene reporter. "I'm standing here in front of the home of congressional freshman Dalton MacArthur. His attorney spoke with us a few minutes ago and said the Congressman is not ready to make a statement at this time. However, he assures us that his client will be completely and quickly cleared of any wrongdoing. This was not so simply put." She peered down to read from her notes. "As he termed it, the charges are—and I quote—'a massive mistake, indeed, a bureaucratic crime that carries with it a ripple effect of financial tentacles reaching into the very corners of the personal lives of innocent people'—unquote. This is Dee Dee Dickinson reporting live from Congressman MacArthur's residence, Los Prados Estates. . . . Back to you, Phil."

Greg gestured excitedly. "See, the same thing happened to me, except the guy never got caught!" He glanced once more at the television set. Seeing that the newscast had moved on to its next story, he continued, "The sucker didn't even see it coming. He probably has credit cards he didn't even know he had."

Smitty sat deep in thought, his chin resting on his partially closed fist. "What you thinkin', Smitty?" Nurse asked.

The mute sat up and blinked hard, staring at the wall. Then he opened his eyes wide, as if a light had come on, and pointed back and forth between his head and his eyes.

“You seen somethin’?” Nurse asked. Smitty nodded. By hook and by crook, soon the woman had deciphered that Smitty had seen the imposter congressman, Roy Higgins, going in and out of Eddie’s gym a few times.

In time the excitement wore off and the day’s flurry of events took their toll on the bleary-eyed team. As late-spring’s dusk faded to night, the Alley Team lolled about on the floor like a teenage slumber party, the television still blaring.

Mitch arrived to the late-night banter of Jay Leno. He flipped off the set and scrounged through the fridge for something to eat. He, too, would shortly be sleeping on the floor beside his fellow nomads, the days and nights overlapping from one unmarked point on the calendar onto the next. Like the paltry peanut spread he’d caked on his slice of bread, the days and nights wore on, tasteless and seemingly indeterminate.

It took Bino almost two minutes to answer the door. He’d dozed off in his easy chair, the television still flashing its sultry scenes, long since disregarded by the gambler. And tonight he didn’t feel so good, having just drawn a sour hand from Frankie—several sour hands, to be exact, mostly slaps across the face and a knee to the groin. “Not enough to kill him,” Vinnie had said. “Just enough to let you know I mean business.”

Barnes and Horne began their interrogation, one that would last well into the night. Bino knew the drill: they’d ask a question, he’d deny knowing anything, or refuse to answer. They’d ask again . . . and so it would go. Yes, Bino’s body hurt, but his soul suffered an agony much worse. Just a glimpse of his young daughter was all they’d given him. She was sobbing her eyes out, clamped in the filthy arms of a thug he’d never laid eyes on before. The car was driven by another of Vinnie’s old buddies from back home, probably flown in just for the occasion. The thug holding her had lifted her head just enough to be sure Bino would see the terrified look on her face. Snatched from her bed in the dead of night, her mother didn’t even know she was missing.

He’d convinced himself that even Vinnie wouldn’t stoop so low as to use the girl as a pawn. Still, taking precautions, he’d tried to persuade his ex-wife to let him take Angelina to Disneyland for a week. It being the last month of the school year—and considering his request most strange—she wouldn’t hear of it.

When the first streaks of dawn painted the Vegas sky a pale blue, a new set of interrogators were parked in Bino's face, asking questions—the same questions he'd heard a hundred times over. He never bothered to lawyer-up. Where he was going in the next few days, he wouldn't need a lawyer—and neither would Vinnie.

A single, chilling, mind-numbing fact kept swimming around in Bino's mind: His little Angelina wouldn't be going home to her mother when the boys went back to Jersey. It wasn't Vinnie's style. Someone would find her on the side of the road, another in a long line of Vinnie's victims. The gun that killed Jimmy would also mysteriously show up, along with an anonymous note as to whom the prints belonged to.

It was in picturing his daughter's face that Bino ultimately found the courage to act. He would give anything to bring her home, safe and sound. Maybe by saving her he could vindicate himself and bring a flicker of purpose to the years of disgrace and humiliation he'd suffered. And perhaps a paragraph or two of his own would help close the wound he'd inflicted in the heart of his ex-wife.

Fed by the angry voices of frustrated agents demanding answers to their inane questions, Bino's sense of duty built to a crescendo. "*I don't know!*" he cried out, rising to his feet. "So you either . . . book me . . . or turn me loose—now!" His chest heaved; every other part of his body shook violently. For nearly 12 hours he'd been deprived of one of his most cherished vices. Now he'd *almost* kill for a cigarette.

By nine a.m. Wednesday, Nurse was already showered and dressed. Lifting a long wooden spoon to her lips, she sampled from an old pot of boiling grits, added some salt and a pinch of pepper, and took another taste. Another second hand pan, full of bacon sizzled on the stove's other burner. Too enthralled with the grits, she didn't notice the dark swell rising from the pan, until every smoke detector in the apartment was crowing its own rise-and-shine symphony. Not exactly the most subtle way for a bunch of criminals to start their morning.

Of course, Cap'n's response had a bad-mouthed tinge to it. To say the least, he didn't hold back on his opinions, none of which touted the marvels of the life-saving device. Between mumbled curses, one could hear the words "blasted communists" and "causin' heart attacks" and "air raids."

Pretty soon everything calmed down and the team got on with the

day's relatively light list of tasks. In an effort to fine-tune their plan, Eddie was assigned to stage a simple experiment with Clint to see if blood really was thicker than water—or, in this case, thicker than money. Sound had agreed to saunter on down to the T-Bird to see if Ritter had shown his face, then return and assemble the team's communication system—a rather Mickey-Mouse system purchased from Radio Shack for \$49.95. And the magic moment everyone was waiting for would be a call from the dental lab. With a 24-hour turn-around time, the new set of dentures would be the finishing touch to the team's masterpiece, the new 'queen of the street,' *Mrs. Rebecca Lambert*.

After breakfast Smitty sat down cross-legged on the kitchen floor to show Mitch how to pick a lock. First he dismantled several simple locks he kept in his tool pouch and demonstrated how they worked. Cap'n passively looked on over Mitch's shoulder.

Mitch caught on quickly and, wielding a pick and a spring, he guided into place the tumbler pins of the most basic lock. But it was harder than Smitty made it out to be. Nevertheless, a frustrating half-hour later, Mitch had successfully opened his first lock. Delighted by his teaching ability, Smitty tossed his hands in the air as if he'd just won the Boston Marathon.

Having beaten the lock—and against the better judgment of both Nurse and Greg—Mitch took a relaxed stroll over to the convention center to call the hospital and check on Grandpa. The news was all good. The old man was doing well, and swore he'd be home in time for supper. The attack had been mild, as heart attacks go. The only drawbacks were that he'd have to put away the pipe and—heaven forbid!—stop eating fried foods. Doctor's orders also prescribed a few pills, bed-rest for a week, and that he cut out chasing ghosts in the junkyard. Within five or six weeks, he'd be back in the pink. "Darn rules . . ." grouched the old man. "They take all the fizz outta life!"

Mitch said his good-byes and hung up the phone—but not before the Feds had narrowed down from which floor and which part of the building the call had originated. Aching to speak with Stephanie, Mitch once more picked up the phone—then abruptly hung it back up. Having been warned by the skittish Alley Team that the phones might be tapped, he maneuvered through the crowds to a more remote bank of pay phones and punched in the number. The only other occupant of the small, six-unit booth hung up his own phone and went off down the hall.

While waiting for the call to connect, Mitch stared down at the carpeted, two-foot square, metal-edged panel under his feet. Subconsciously, he tapped his foot on the center of the panel, which swayed ever so slightly beneath him. The phone rang, then rang again.

"Hi, Maggie," greeted Mitch, nervously. "Is—uh—Stephanie there?"

On the other line, Maggie was unsure of what to do next. "Hello, Mitch." She rolled her eyes, a signal to Sutton—who'd returned for a second tour of duty—to flip on the recording device and caller ID equipment set up near the stove. Then she handed Stephanie the phone.

Stephanie's tone was breezy. "Mitch . . ."

"I don't have much time, and we're probably being listened in on, so I'll make this short. I love you . . ."

"I love you, too, Mitch—and you're right. Why don't you come in and let the police help us?"

"I can't. Not yet, anyway." A man sidled up to place a call one spot away. From behind the screen separating the two phones, Mitch could see the fellow's casual loafers.

"They know almost everything that's going on. They want to help; they can protect us . . ."

"Like they protected you the other night?" Mitch chimed in. "Like they helped me in high school?" He craned his neck to peer over the heads of the Home Expo guests, keeping a close eye on the exit doors.

"They've beefed up security since then, Mitch. They have someone with me 24 hours a day. We're being moved to a safe-house this afternoon. "

Mitch's fingers toyed with his All-In-One knife/tool, shoved deep in his pants pocket. "We can't hide forever. I have to finish what I started. . . . Stef, it'll be over in a few days—I promise." He tried to lighten the conversation—and send a hidden message. "And if you start to worry, you make a quick pot of *dog stew*, okay?"

Stephanie blinked and crinkled her eyebrows. *What did he mean by that?* Then its meaning kicked in. "Okay," she replied.

"I love you. And I didn't kill anyone, but I know who did. If I come in now we'll never be safe again, trust me." A silver sedan pulled up at the service dock and two men bustled from its doors. "I've got to run . . ." He slammed down the receiver.

"I *do* trust you . . ." Her words were drowned out by the dial tone.

Trapped in the center of the sprawling building's north corridor,

Mitch, his heart pounding in his chest, crouched down to consider his options. The agents seemed to know exactly where they were headed and who they were looking for. No doubt they'd studied his photograph and profile in every detail. At this stage of the game, they were primed for the hunt. He again stared down at the floor panel, his natural mechanical curiosity at its peak. A recessed pull-ring on one side of the door, a bolt on the other edge, it just might work. With busy conventioners traipsing up and down the corridor behind him, Mitch pulled a handful of change from his pocket and let it fall to the floor. The caller in the next booth shifted his weight uneasily as Mitch dropped to his knees. "I've got it," he called out cheerily as he began to crawl about, collecting the coins.

A few hurried passers by glared in the direction of the man in the booth, on his knees, his left hand busily dropping change as fast as it was picked up. What most could not see was what his right hand was doing. Clutching his pocket tool, Mitch unscrewed the trap door's large stainless bolt. Meanwhile, Mitch continued digging coins from the carpet around the other caller's feet, purposely driving him to the far side of his booth.

Staring through a multitude of legs and feet, Mitch spotted the dress slacks and shiny shoes of his pursuers. They were a mere hundred yards away, closing in fast. If a simple utility repair box was behind his floor panel, he was dead; if, on the other hand, it led to the mechanical conduit between floors, he had a chance. He peered up one last time, then jammed the driver bit under its lip and pried it up.

To his relief, a dark void greeted him. A rush of air blew into his face as he urged his shoulders down through the opening. Hitting bottom, he turned and lunged upward, latching onto the door and easing it back over the hole. Then he lay still, body hunched over, knees pressed to his chest. In seconds a set of heavy footsteps tramped across the floor above him, accompanied by muffled voices. "He's not here . . . Check the hallway . . ."

Mitch groped in the pitch blackness and inched his way through what appeared to be a concrete maze of pipes and wires. He chuckled softly. How ironic: the floor panel could end up being either an escape hatch or a door to a dungeon. Regardless, by choosing it, he'd just sealed his fate.

The voices receded as he crawled farther from the door above. His eyes began to adjust to the darkness. Here and there, tiny shards of light shot down through openings in the ceiling where pipes or wires

terminated. As he fumbled like a mole to find his way, he cracked his skull on one of the maze's low-hanging corners.

Suddenly the tunnel lit up behind him. "We've got a rat down here," a voice called out. "Get a light—he can't be far."

Mitch scooted along on his hands and knees, ending up in a spot in the conduit where it split into a T. Both ways disappeared into a black unknown.

"He was right here picking up his change," he heard the man who had been on the next phone say.

The light from the doorway momentarily dimmed as an agent dropped inside the horizontal shaft. Mitch turned the corner, heading blindly to the left. A whiff of chemical cleaner drifted down the passage, its toxic odor mingling with the suffocating, dusty air. The sound of flushing toilets echoed from close by. Mitch lurched in the direction of the sound, down a connecting tunnel. In seconds a beam of light bounced off the wall at the end of the tunnel just behind. Heavy breathing and grunts echoed down the shaft.

Mitch lurched recklessly on until he came to a metal step bolted to a concrete wall. A narrow cavity led upward to another small floor panel. He groped in the semi-darkness overhead. Unable to feel any kind of bolt or latch, he applied the weight of his shoulder—and the door popped open. A large, vented door provided enough light for Mitch to tell that he'd come up into some sort of janitorial closet. Straightway he repositioned the trap door back in its place and piled some nearby buckets and boxes of paper towels on top of it. Then he took stock of the situation.

He could see that the lit-up door led to a restroom. Snatching a mop down off the wall, he plunged it inside a bucket, slung a yellow CAUTION: WET FLOOR sign onto his shoulder and pushed through the closet door, wheeling his tools out into the middle of the floor.

Freedom . . . it was too good to be true—literally. Only then did Mitch realize that he was standing in a ladies' restroom. A flush came from the nearest stall; a woman looked up in surprise from the sink where she was washing her hands. "Uh, sorry, ma'am," he stammered. "I kinda forgot to put out the warning sign." Feeling like some sort of pervert, he wheeled his bucket out into the corridor, whistling as he went, and propped the mop handle across the entrance. Then, dropping the yellow sign on the floor, he called back inside, "Would you please come and tell me when everyone is

out?” The water in the sink shut off and the woman answered with a timid “Yes.”

Gazing off down the busy hallway, Mitch could see a half-dozen agents crowded around the phone booth, only 40 feet away. A staticky voice rasped from a radio, set on the shelf next to the phone Mitch had been using. Intent on hearing directions from the man down in the tunnel below their feet, they were oblivious to the new janitor walking in the opposite direction, away from the rubber-necking crowd.

FORTY

SHE WAS REMARKABLY BEAUTIFUL, especially from a distance. Her new smile glistened in the sunlight; a half-pound of make-up blanketed her tired, crusty, sun-baked shell; a piece or two of expensive-looking costume jewelry, another new dress, and, all combined, it did the trick. She had become a genuine, elderly, elegant old matron. That is, until she opened her mouth to speak. “Can’t say a blasted thing, these confounded chompers keep fallin’ out!” Nurse huffed, her characteristic soft, toothless whistle now more of a steam engine blowing its stack.

The Alley Team stood in awe at the miraculous transformation wrought by a set of ceramic ivories. “You look incredible, Nurse,” Sound was the first to say.

“*Mrs. Lambert, to you!*”

Cap’n stepped into the fray, playfully applying a big elbow to Sound’s rib-cage, sending the skinny, bird-legged man sprawling across the floor. “She looks kinda’ like Eddie’s daughter, but much older. An’ now,” he continued, “she’s even tryin’ to talk the same language.”

“Ouch!” shrieked Sound, straightening himself up and brushing his ruffled chest feathers back into place. Then he turned on Cap’n, only partly in jest. “Don’t you have any tact? She doesn’t look *that* much older. . . . And you shouldn’t go around poking me like that!”

“She just better keep her flap shut, is all I can say,” Cap’n chuckled.

Greg, standing near the door a pace or two behind Nurse, shot both of them a look that could scare a Halloween witch.

“S-see,” Nurse said as she yanked the uppers free. “Ain’t no use wearin’ ‘em if’n no one’s gonna believe a word I says.”

Smitty seemed most intrigued by the removable teeth. Staring at the dentures Nurse had clutched in her hand, he brushed lightly at his own rotting cuspids with the end of his fingers.

Greg patted the old woman on the back. “They’ll just take a little

getting used to.” But Nurse wasn’t at all convinced. She thrust her tongue up to the roof of her mouth and started to gag, then yanked the bottom set free. “Feels like I’m gonna puke. This trash they call cream is more like peanut butter mint. Can’t stand th’ taste a’ mint.” The matron-to-be stuck her finger in her mouth and scraped it along her gums, extracting a spit-laden residue of green paste. She gagged again and went to wipe her finger on her dress. Stopping herself, she looked over at Sound, who shook his head.

Greg shook his own head as he observed the faces of the little team. Cap’n’s smile had turned into a sour scowl—as if he himself were about to gag—poor Smitty looked like he’d just had all hopes of a new mouth of his own dashed to pieces with a giant sledge hammer, while Sound’s face mirrored absolute disgust. He reached into his shirt pocket and brought out a crinkled paper napkin and held it out to her.

“I have an idea,” Greg said. The entire team turned as one, as though looking away from a classmate throwing up on the gym floor. “What if we send Sound everywhere Mrs. Lambert goes—her butler, if you will. We could dress him in a fancy servant’s outfit or something that made him look the part. Then he could do most of the talking.”

Smitty nodded enthusiastically, and Cap’n’s sourpuss expression bloomed into a big grin. “A tux with tails,” he laughed. “White gloves, too.”

“Get serious,” Sound grumped. “It’d never work.”

“We could get a suit for Cap’n and a girdle to slim him up a bit,” Greg continued. “The flecks of gray in his hair and a nice suit would make him look like a gambler on the prowl. He’d just hang around, keep the two of you safe if anything went wrong.”

If he’d had a voice, Smitty would have laughed out loud. Sound, however, was tittering enough for them both. Hands on knees and ‘funny-tears’ leaking down his face, this time he made sure to stay out of reach of the big black man’s burly elbows.

“‘At mean I don’t got to wear these darn things?’” Nurse giggled her set of new teeth in her hand.

“No, it just means you won’t need to say much.” Greg turned to Smitty. “I almost forgot, did you go see Eddie?”

Smitty nodded, bent over and rammed his hand in the front pocket of his baggy pants. He jerked out a new Nevada driver’s licence and three false credit cards and handed them to Greg. Nurse peered over

Greg's arm at the fake ID, an impressive piece of work. "Ain't bad, for a cheap passport photo. Ain't bad at all. Maybe 'at boy a' Eddie's got a bit a' good left in him after all."

Sound gave a start. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Last night Ritter was by the T-bird, looking for us. He told my friend he'd be back tonight. . . . Oh, and he was wearing a new suit himself."

"I don't like it," Cap'n thundered. "'Less he stole some a' Lightnin's money, he'd never be able t' afford a new suit. He's two-timin' us, I know it. A double-agent two-timer. The day's comin' we hang that boy on the long arm where everyone can see his . . ."

Nurse stopped Cap'n in his tracks. "'At's enough. Don't know nothin' yet. We best give Ritter th' benefit of th' doubt."

"Do you think he'd turn on us?" Greg asked.

"Don't think so, Sunny, but like I said 'fore, he always did run on a diff'rent track 'an ever'one else. But I never once caught him lyin' t' me."

Greg remained cautiously neutral. "I still suggest we don't let him know where we're staying."

"Agreed," Nurse answered.

Mitch was on his third city bus, now headed up Sahara Avenue. The last thing he wanted to do was lead a pack of disgruntled Federal agents to the team's doorstep—thus the bus-hopping. The quick escape from the convention center had been a fluke. It was unlikely his ingenuity would again prevail over the government's best. Maybe Stephanie was right. Maybe it was time to turn the whole mess over to the FBI. Surely they'd see that he'd been set up, wouldn't they? They'd understand how his prints got on the gun that killed Mike—maybe. But how would they respond to the fire that sent the body shop up in flames, or his destroying evidence, or his inciting a major panic at Three Queens. *Not a chance. They hadn't believed his story about the convenience store robbery . . . this absurd chain of events would blow their socks right off.*

After exiting the bus, Mitch walked to the apartment building, took the elevator to the 5th floor, and gave the door a gentle rap. "Who is it?" Cap'n boomed from behind the door.

"Mitch." He could hear the muted voices of Cap'n and Nurse, arguing whether or not he should use the 'Lightning' moniker.

"For crup's sake," Nurse ranted. "You knows who it is. Jus' open it up."

Cap'n cracked the door, then turned sideways to let Mitch squeeze past. Piles of cash and miscellaneous receipts cluttered the kitchen floor. Sound held a notepad in his hand, a pencil crammed behind his ear. His mood was somber, fretful. "How much cash do you still have?"

"I don't know," Mitch replied, a bit startled. He felt like a nickel arcade employee whose cash drawer had been found short.

Sound sensed Mitch's minor annoyance. After all, it was his cash in the first place. "Ritter stopped by the T-Bird, wearing a new suit," he explained. "We need to know where he got the money. The only way to decide if it came from us, is to account for every dollar."

Cap'n reiterated his venomous view of the situation. "I say he's a two-timin' double agent. Need to hang him for treason."

The rest of the team, tired of Cap'n's constant diatribes, ignored the intrusion. Mitch plucked his wallet from his hip. "Fifty-three-dollars and change," he said, pulling out a handful of coins from his pocket.

"How much have you spent?"

Mitch turned his head in thought. "Ten bucks in change for phone calls . . . about five for lunch. You paid for the apartment and deposit . . ."

"I've got that. Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of."

Sound, his interrogation complete, began to count in a whisper. His pencil tapped the notepad, at least some of the calculations being performed manually. "Carry the one . . ." he muttered under his breath, ". . . thirteen, plus nine . . ." Finally he slid the pencil to his ear. "That makes us only thirty dollars and twenty-five-cents short. Not enough to buy a suit."

Cap'n barged into the breach. "See, I told ya'. He's on the other side . . ."

"Cap'n!" Nurse carped, her voice adamant. "I ain't goin' t' tell ya' 'gain. We's tired a' hearin' yer jaw flap on an' on 'bout Ritter. Let's give the boy a word a' his own 'fore we toss 'im in th' pig slop." Her harangue ended, Nurse turned to Sunny. "You got any ideas?"

Greg looked around the room. It was strange how the money scattered about on the table didn't seem to bother the team. They had nothing, yet in their minds they had everything they needed. Even with half of the \$20,000 gone—more than any one of them had earned

in the past five years—they were only thirty dollars short. *Thirty measly dollars*, he mused. *It'd be interesting to see if the best, most scrupulous of corporations could come so close.* With no formal accounting system, half-a-dozen different people dipping into the stash, and no one in charge of disbursements or doling out change, it was a remarkable thing.

“First I need to say,” Greg began, “I am deeply impressed by the honesty and dedication of your little family. I’ve never seen such loyalty among friends. I want you to know that no matter what happens during the next few days, I’ve learned more from you than you’ll ever know. . . .”

Cap’n swallowed hard, Sound was starting to tear up, Smitty stared down at the floor, and Nurse listened intently, each absorbed in thought, each feeling guilty for the secret they kept tucked deep inside.

Greg continued. “I always thought success in life was governed by the amount of money I made, the car I drove, the size of my house, my job title. You’ve taught me so much more. I got caught up with *things*. Things don’t make one happy—it’s all an illusion. You live on the streets of a city full of false dreams, yet every day you rise above it all by your character.” He looked Sound in the eye and blinked back his own feelings. “Thank you.” An awkward stillness settled over the room, a warm chill. Like being wrapped in a familiar blanket on a winter’s night, then finding that the blanket has been torn to shreds, a cold sliver of deceit pierced what should have been a celebration of friendship.

After a long pause, Nurse broke the silence. “Now ‘fore we gets mushy, best we get this cash put away and figure out what we plan on doin’ with Ritter.”

After going over a dozen instructions and executing a quick trial run of Sound’s new listening equipment, the team, each with a giant bowl of ice cream, sat down to listen to Mitch’s latest exploits. They roared with laughter and “ooohed” and “ahhed” in turn as he related his escape from the convention center, his multiple bus rides, how he and Smitty had managed to purloin Vinnie’s car, the 220-mph chase up the freeway, and his bumpy ride through—and culvert nap in—the desert. When Mitch described his future plans, how he would return the Ferrari to its original owner by way of a quick wash and wax at the car wash before delivering it, the team laughed until they cried.

By quarter to eleven that evening Ritter was on his way to the T-

bird. The pleats in his pants and suit coat, unlike the night before, were gone, replaced by wrinkles, having served as his pajamas through a long, painful night under the Rio bridge. The throbbing in his little finger was a vivid reminder of the brutal nature of his new bedfellow—who now, unbeknownst to Ritter, was ordering his death. The Feds too, now lingering in the shadows, held out hope that the Englishman would lend a clue as to the whereabouts of Mike's body.

Smitty waited on the tattered couch in the T-bird's foyer. It had been a simple choice to whom the task should fall. The mute had volunteered before being asked. He was the most expendable of the team, and if he were caught he couldn't be coerced to give up any information. Wearing his old street clothes, consisting of some tattered brown pants cinched high by a pair of red suspenders, he was still mostly clean-shaven, with only a day or two's growth of straggly whiskers clinging to his broad face.

In his report to the group, Mitch had commented on Smitty's singular bravery and quick-thinking. Now, waiting for Ritter to show, he sat reveling in his heroic deeds. Nonchalantly, he reached up to press his earpiece tightly in his ear. Sound's device was working well. Each member of the team was posted within a few blocks, scattered at several preassigned spots. Cap'n was the first to report Ritter's movements. "I got him," he whispered into the cheap, two-way radio strapped under his shirt. "He's walkin' east on Imperial." Cap'n, too, was dressed in his familiar Army garb. After being free of the rags for a few days, however, he now realized how bad the old shirt and faded coveralls smelled—not to mention the too small heavy coat choking his large torso. Sweat coursed down his head and neck. He longed for his ice-water-filled cooler.

Nurse, meanwhile, hobbled unnoticed to an intercept course. Snug in her old clothing, despite the smell, she smiled her toothless grin. She'd take an old pair of boxer shorts any day over the repressive garter belt and girdle she'd been forced to wear. The old woman peered through the darkness, her eyes still struggling to adjust to the bright flashing headlights.

Ritter paused on the sidewalk outside the T-bird and rocked back on his heels, looking around warily. The long walk had flared up his bunions again; the new footwear made it all the worse. His rags had been properly discarded by the maid at Three Queens. His old pair of com-

fortable shoes had been the greatest loss.

Just inside the door, Smitty's mouth twitched nervously. His neck tendons tightened and relaxed as he watched Ritter wobble up the sidewalk. He pressed the transmit button on his own radio, locking it in place, and pulled the earpiece out and tucked it under his shirt.

Suddenly the radio whistled. "I got a bogie! I repeat, I got a bogie!" Cap'n shrieked. "Someone's on his tail. Get out, Smitty! I repeat, pull out!"

Smitty uncrossed his lanky legs and wiggled his foot. Ritter entered the lobby and glanced around the room. Then he fixed his gaze on his tongue-tied friend.

"Crimony, Smitty, I didn't expect you to meet me." He gave the mute the once over. "Ya look right sod, mate, wit' your whiskers gone." Smitty nodded and stroked the lapel of Ritter's suit between his fingers. "That's right-hit the lotto. That Mr. Vinnie's a right cheeky devil, he is. Can smile at ya' an' stab ya' in the back in the same instant." He held up a bandaged finger. "He chopped me pinky off pert near at the joint. Told me it was a warnin' not to cross him. Stupid bloke thinks I'll give it up, where we deposited the *merchandise*." The Brit plopped down on the couch next to Smitty.

Two blocks away Mitch was on a dead run; Greg was on his way from a different direction. Smitty didn't deserve to take the fall for them. Skidding to a stop at the neighboring business's dumpster, Mitch gasped, "Where is he, Cap'n?"

Cap'n pointed down the street to a man dressed in ragged clothes and talking into his shirt collar. Mitch squinted at the figure. "Who do you think he is?"

"Shhh," Cap'n said. He pressed his earpiece tight, eavesdropping on Ritter's one-sided conversation.

"You remember me mum, don't you, Smitty?" Ritter asked, his tone softening.

Smitty nodded. He'd seen the photos before.

"Me mum's in the hospital. She ain't got a soul t' keep an eye on her no more. I'd move me blooming butt back to Yorkshire today—if me brother wasn't in such a fix. He ain't quite right in the head, you know. . . . I figure fifty-grand'll get him off the dole an' in a program. Once he's better, he can take care a' me mum. When the money's in the Midland Bank, then I'll take Mr. Vinnie to the merchandise, but not until the money's there. That ought to give you time to make a switch. Mr. Vinnie's a bad one. If I don't get a chance to tell the others, you tell 'em goodbye fer me, okay?" Ritter stood.

“You watch your back. Some feller’s been tailing me.” Smitty nodded. “You’re all right, pet.” He gave Smitty a slap on the back and turned to walk from the building.

From across the parking lot, Cap’n, his face leaking big tears down onto his heavy, green coat, stared at the T-bird’s front doors. “What is it? Greg asked, still breathing too hard to hear what had been said.

“He’s goin’ to get himself killed, the stupid bloke. He’s decided to take Mr. Vinnie on himself. He knows someone’s followin’ him, too.”

Still lounging in the foyer, Smitty snapped the medical tape that held the small radio to his chest and slid it out of his shirt to the couch, where he shoved it between the cushions. He then got up and followed Ritter to the street. The Alley Team looked on helplessly as a gray van pulled up alongside the curb and a couple of Federal agents got out and shoved Smitty inside. Mitch started off to help his friend, but Cap’n caught him by the arm. “We knew it weren’t safe when he went in,” he said. “We don’t need t’ worry. They can’t do much to a man that can’t talk.”

Into the wee hours of morning Barnes and Horne interrogated the man who, they figured, could shed some light on the whole mess. It wasn’t until two a.m. that they came to the conclusion that Smitty truly couldn’t talk. Horne, however, still held to the notion that it was more a case that he *wouldn’t* talk. They still had no idea who he was or where he’d come from—no records of any sort. Neither had he demanded to be released. On the contrary, he sat through the barrage of questioning, sometimes curling into a fetal ball if the voices became too loud.

“Call the department shrink,” Barnes ordered. “Get him out of bed—get him in here. This guy’s either nuts or the toughest nut I’ve ever seen.”

Meanwhile, crouched near the door leading to Ford’s Frozen Food Locker’s basement, Cap’n held a flashlight while Mitch struggled to crack his own tough problem. The lock just wouldn’t cooperate. Finally the big man’s patience had worn thin. “Step aside! I’ll break it in!”

“I’ve almost got it. Hold your horses,” Mitch replied, only slightly distracted by Cap’n’s bluster.

“You been tellin’ me that for thirty minutes. We ain’t got all night.”

Mitch threw back his shoulders and stretched his arms. "What? You think Mike might get up and walk away?"

"Hey, you said ya' could pick the lock . . ."

"I can. I just didn't know it would take this long. Now please be quiet and let me work in peace."

Cap'n leaned back. Steadying the beam on the doorknob, he angled his legs down the small concrete stairway that led to the door, resigned to watching the man work. The team had taken a vote and decided that it was time to move the body. The only problem with the move was that it might be a few days before a new home could be secured. Cap'n's job had been to secure a big-screen television box, which he pulled from the Hilton's dumpster. Mitch, after finding a car without a locking wheel, had hot-wired an old Ford Falcon in the Hilton's employee parking lot. The feat had taken 15 seconds flat. After their caper was finished, a hundred-dollar-bill would be left in the car as payment to its owner, along with a note of apology for taking it without asking.

Everything had gone as planned, except getting at the body. Without Smitty, it was a long-shot. Cap'n released a drawn out sigh, then an involuntary shudder. "Don't know if I'll be able t' sleep with your friend there in the house."

"I haven't been able to sleep since we brought him here," Mitch replied as the door popped open. Then he said, "This isn't going to be easy."

Cap'n scrambled to his feet. "But it's open."

"I don't mean the door. I mean seeing him again."

"I know what you mean," Cap'n said with a note of melancholy. "I killed my best friend when I was sixteen. Back then I had a terrible temper. Sometimes I didn't even know what I was doin'."

"Is that what happened to the guard the other night?"

"Guess so. I don't remember much when I go off like that. See, me an' Lou—he was my best friend—we grew up together in the slums of Jackson, Mississippi. Our mamas both worked, so after school we found ways t' keep ourselves occupied. One day I found an old, stray mutt. . . . Man, I loved that dog. Called him Buzz," Cap'n chuckled. "'cause he was always buzzin' round after his tail. Taught him how to sit. Saved half my supper beans ever' night to share with him." They stopped a little over halfway down the dimly lit hall. Cap'n pointed up at the numbers above one of the lockers. "This the one?"

Mitch nodded and went to work on its padlock—a much easier task. “You had beans for supper every night?”

“Weren’t nothin’ else.”

“So what happened?”

“After a few months Lou found some new friends. They made fun a’ me an’ my dog; said he was nothin’ but a worm-infested mongrel. I didn’t really care what they said, but Lou’s new friends told him that if he wanted to be part a’ their club, he needed t’ kill my dog. Even loaned him the gun.”

Mitch tugged on the lock’s hasp and it broke free. “What did he do?”

Cap’n clicked open the handle on the big freezer, swung the door open, and gazed distantly into the dark box. Both men thoughtfully busied themselves moving cuts of beef. “I heard a shot and come runnin’ from the projects. I found Buzz. He was twistin’ ‘round on the ground, bitin’ at his leg an’ hip. Well, when Lou raised his gun and let loose with a second shot, I guess I grabbed him. Next thing I knows I was watchin’ Buzz bleed to death. Lou was layin’ right there, too. I lost both my best friends the same day, right there in the alley. They let me off; said it was a crime of passion. About that time all my friends were headed to ‘Nam, so I tried t’ join up with the Marines. They wouldn’t take me. Said I was crazy. The next year my little brother and mama were killed in a drive-by shootin’. After that, I up and left Mississippi.” Cap’n stopped to remove his coat. Like casting the memory out of his mind, he tossed it on a stack of meat. “We best finish up. We want t’ get some sleep ‘fore sunrise.”

“The man can’t speak, Agent Barnes. He’s a mute. From the size and shape of his head, I’d guess he suffered trauma to his head or spine as an infant. Regardless, I’ve never met anyone like him before.”

“Do you think he knows what’s going on?”

The psychiatrist shrugged. “It’s hard to say. He could be marginally functional or very bright. From what I can tell, he’s never learned to sign or read or write. I say you drop a microchip in his back pocket, turn him loose and see where he goes. He’ll probably go back to where he came from, and just might help you catch your man.” Barnes nodded.

In conformance with the collected wisdom of the FBI’s best, it was decided. With a donut clutched in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other,

Smitty was led out the building's rear door and wished a pleasant morning.

FORTY-ONE

THE STORY OF THE MISSING GIRL had moved from the front page of *The Las Vegas Sun* to the second page—all in the same number of days. Barnes had promised Bino the maximum amount of protection if he would give up what he knew. Only by cooperating with them, he was told, could he hope to save his daughter.

With the missing agent mystery now in its sixth day, the trail leading to Mike's body was growing cold. What's more, the Agency's resources were being spread thin. Two men on Ritter's trail—one during the day, the other at night—two staying with Stephanie, two more on Bino, and half-a-dozen charting Vinnie's every move—as well as keeping an eye on his carcass full of maggots—it was just getting to be too much. Barnes and Horne were all strung out. Outside pressures were building, with the SAC getting heat from Headquarters in D.C. Arrests needed to be made, families needed to be informed, and someone needed to take the long, hard fall for the lost agent.

The biggest break had come with the swift meltdown of the T-bird desk clerk. Three rooms had been paid for with cash. The guests staying in those rooms hadn't been at all typical, having actually stayed the night. The hunch-backed mute with the red suspenders was with them, along with an old woman and a slender man, who was lacking in hair. Mitch had fit the description of one of the two most sane of the insane bunch. Cap'n's description had somehow slipped through the cracks of the clerk's memory.

A second, less significant break in the case had occurred when Smitty sauntered into Reverend Keller's kitchen for a bowl of hot mush and the best cold orange juice on the city block. The reverend was more concerned about his little flock and the ecclesiastical aura of confidentiality than in giving the information the two agents demanded. One agent had leaned over the desk in Keller's little office while the other stood in the hallway, keeping an eye on the mute, who was shoveling brown sugar-sprinkled mush in his mouth like it was going out of style.

About the time Smitty had taken his place in line for a second bowl of cereal, the voices in the back office had become heated, and every eye in the lunch hall turned its attention on the two cops harassing the shepherd of their flock. The retired plumber had finally lost his cool. Jerking the collar from his shirt and recalling the vocabulary of his pipe-bending days, Bart Keller lit into the two troublemakers. In short order he'd sent the both of them packing, at the same time tightening his trust and loving hold on his wayward flock, who had no idea the soft-spoken servant could wield such a big pipe.

Distracted by the fracas, Smitty, in a fraction of a second, had dropped his bowl, leaned down to pick it up, and disappeared under the table, crawling past the enormous legs of Cook, then scooting out the kitchen exit.

When the suits realized the mute was no longer standing in the soup line, they tore through the hall, splitting the wave of homeless hungry like Moses parting the Red Sea. Indeed, they needed a miracle to keep from being the laughingstock of the Agency. Their inability to follow a man who seemed just marginally functional would become legendary if Smitty got away. After an exhaustive search, they came to the one conclusion they most dreaded: They'd fumbled away the second best break the Agency had. The minor miracle of vanishing into thin air had been granted to a mute whose stepmother had claimed wasn't worth the energy to drown.

It didn't take long for the agents to buy 20 dollars' worth of information from a man the others called "Finders," their boneheaded bad luck seemed to have turned for the better. With Finders' help, by 11:00 a.m. they'd located the remnants of Nurse's shack, Cap'n's empty home under I-15, and the homeless shelter near the Strip where Sound had once stayed. Smitty's residence had as yet eluded them.

The big day was at hand—crunch time on the Strip. Avoiding the far corner of the back bedroom and the big-screen television box packed with dry ice and wrapped in several layers of dirty blankets, the Alley Team saw to its last-minute preparations. The mood in the apartment was somber. The loss of the silent deep-thinker, the character behind the wide, smiling face, left a painful hole in everyone's heart.

Mitch seemed to take Smitty's absence the hardest. He knew how much the man idolized his bold style; how he was all ears while Mitch

described his clever get-away at the convention center. It seemed that, in a way, Smitty had given himself up as a sacrificial lamb.

The tensions seemed to mount on every side. Nurse was up and dressed, and had used a new, non-minty brand of denture cream to affix her teeth to her gums. Nevertheless, her grumbling and goading hadn't changed one bit. A big bundle of nerves, she took it upon herself to find fault with everything and everyone: Sound didn't look at all like a butler; the way he'd fixed her hair was "silly-lookin'," not to mention the fact that he had used way too much hair spray; her stockings clung to her legs "as tight as Ace bandages;" and they were all going to get caught, "sure as shootin'!"

Greg watched with fascination as the crabby old woman stormed around the apartment. Her made-up face brimmed with happy wrinkles even while her mouth was spewing contempt. The source of her venom was threefold: first, she was jittery as all get out, dreading her coming-out party; a second factor was her rough upbringing and hard life; and part stemmed from Smitty's absence. This the entire team understood. In their eyes she was a remarkable woman who had risen above all odds. Because of her innate goodness and love, her giving heart, her plucky courage and staunch determination—which some would instead term 'reckless abandon' and 'stubbornness'—she'd flourished.

As she started out the door, she turned sharply, stretched the white gloves up over her wrists, and said, "An' what you findin' so funny 'bout all this, Sunny?"

Greg blinked and fitted a frown on his face. "I was just thinking what an amazing woman you are, and how foolish your husband was to let you get away. You're truly one of a kind, Mrs. Rebecca Lambert. And no matter what happens, you'll always be a winner to me. The '*Rain in Spain*' can't even change that."

Nurse winked, then chomped her teeth to keep them in place. "You can tell me all that mushy stuff after we bring back the dough." She flashed an anxious smile, then opened the door and stepped out into the hallway.

Sound followed, then took Greg's extended hand. "You're an incredible person, too," Greg said, giving Sound's slim fingers a brotherly squeeze. "Take good care of her."

"I will."

"And remember, pull out at any sign of trouble."

Sound doubled over as he coughed and clutched at his bruised ribs.

"Don't worry," he sighed, "I'm the biggest coward of the bunch. Believe me, I wouldn't even be going if she wasn't with me."

Greg clapped a hand on the man's gaunt shoulder. "You okay?"

"Fine. Just a little cough."

"I hope so. If it makes any difference, you're the only one of us brave enough to admit you're a coward."

The grand dame and her faithful butler disappeared down the hall. Greg had closed the door and gone back to studying the master plan, when Mitch came out of the bathroom, drying his hair with the same towel the rest of the team had used previously. "You think they can do it?" he asked, dropping the towel on the floor.

Greg stared derisively down at the towel, then over at Mitch, whose mind was fastened on other things. "If anybody can pull off this crazy stunt, Nurse can." He stepped to the window and parted the blinds. There, crossing the parking lot, were the two well-dressed vagabonds. The sight evoked in him the same feelings as when he sent his first group of junior executive trainees out on their maiden journeys.

Mitch ran his fingers back through his hair. "I've been thinking about Smitty."

"Me too." Greg walked over to where Mitch had tossed his towel.

"If they let him go, you think they'll try to follow him back?"

"That's what I've been wondering. I hope not. There's no telling what the authorities would do if they found what's inside that box in the back room—the one we've all been avoiding all morning." He picked up the towel and shook it out. "What does your wife say when you leave your towel laying around on the floor?"

Mitch stared dumbly at the towel in Greg's hand, then at the floor where it had lain. "I didn't even realize I'd dropped it."

The expression on Greg's face was one of empathy, not of finding fault. "How long have you been married?"

"Three years. Why?"

"She must not complain much. I used to do the same thing. It was the second year of our marriage before Linda finally admitted that it drove her crazy to pick up after me." Greg stared distantly at the floor, the bitter-sweet memory still fresh in his mind.

Mitch lifted his eyebrows. The conversation had taken a strange turn. "Sorry. . . . I'll put it away."

"No, *I'm* sorry. The oddest things make me yearn for what I can't

have. What I'd give to have Linda nag me again about picking up my dirty socks. . . . Now, about the body, do you have any ideas where to put it?"

Longing to jump on a bus or two and come along home—just like Mitch—but having no cash, Smitty rested on a park bench off Mojave and Harris. A fountain in the center of the park sent geysers of water high into the air. When the water reached its peak, it would hover for a split second on the gushing stream below, then tumble back down through the strong jet, back to the rippling waters that had given it birth.

The fountain took the sting out of the afternoon heat. For Smitty the place had been a regular spot to meditate and ponder when the sun rose high. The park usually emptied in the heat of the afternoon, and he would find himself trying to build up the courage to wade in the water like he often saw the children do, their mothers close at hand, smiling and laughing.

Feeling the cooling mist against his face, the mute reflected on the simple thought that had plagued him for years. Could he get close enough to slip off his shoes and just put his feet in the water? Would it swallow him up, pull him under? Why were the children so unafraid as they frolicked and splashed about? They seemed to find it exhilarating. He gazed across the babbling fountain to a man on a bench, reading a magazine. The stranger peered up periodically from his publication. Smitty thought it odd that he sat opposite the breeze.

Smitty stood; the man peered over the top of his magazine. Sliding his thumbs under his red suspenders, Smitty, feigning a leisurely stroll, made his way across the fresh-cut grass, deeper into the park. The man stood and tucked his magazine under his arm, an act that didn't go unnoticed by the crafty street urchin, who stopped to pick up a small feather from the lawn. Holding it up to the sky, he ran it through his fingers, then stroked it across his cheek and forehead. The stranger paused, then sought relief from the scorching sun under a nearby palm. Smitty resumed his loafing, paying no mind to his stalker. By and by, the man nonchalantly dropped onto the soft, cool turf to pick up where he'd left off in his reading.

In a sudden burst of energy Smitty stretched his new-found wings to the air and dashed across the lawn like a bird in flight, back toward the fountain. The agent gave chase, stopping briefly to report that the mute was on the run. Smitty skidded to a halt on the up-wind side of the fountain and raised his feather high in the air, setting it adrift in the wind. It glided softly on the breeze, coming to rest on the water, bobbing gently on its surface. Just

then the agent came into sight. With Smitty's gaze on him, he quickly narrowed his stride and tried his best to shield himself behind another paltry palm.

Again Smitty took a seat on the bench and soaked in the pond's mist, studying the feather's movements and pondering his own life, mirrored in that tiny speck of sodden wing. Within a few minutes the small feather seemed to lose its buoyancy. Under the waves it went, over and over again, being dunked like a drowning child.

Nurse stood next to Sound at the cashier's desk with a false New York ID and a purse full of new credit cards. She smiled widely, even as her knees knocked together under her dress. "That's five thousand, Mrs. Thurston," the cashier said, placing the last hundred-dollar chip on the stack. "Have a nice afternoon."

With her gloved hand, Nurse scooted the stack toward Sound, who once again addressed the cashier. "Would you give us a thousand in fifty-dollar chips?" He peeled off ten bills and slid them back across the counter, then deposited the balance of the heavy wad in his pants pocket. As the teller stacked the chips, Nurse peeked up out of the corner of her eye to the camera in the corner. It swept slowly back and forth, making indelible digital images of their illegal act.

Her mind raced back some five decades earlier. Only 20 years old, she'd taken a job with the laundry business on Carson. They paid 25 cents a day, then a decent wage. She went by the name 'Becky' back then. Living in a little studio apartment behind the laundry, she was known by all as "the crazy girl." In those days, a single mom raising an infant daughter was considered an outcast. The other employees often teased and ridiculed her. But Becky carried on, doing her job, loving her precious Belle. She was a good baby, for the most part sleeping during the day and only needing to be nursed at the noon break and before and after work. The young mother found solace in pretending the babe was yet alive.

The great depression didn't hit Vegas quite as hard as the rest of the country. That's why Becky was there. One of the attendants at the Alabama State Mental Hospital had recommended the change. Since people still came to the city to try their hand at chance, pouring their meager earnings into the hands of the rich and powerful, the place was more boom than bust. Still, the laundry business struggled to survive. Before she'd had four solid weeks of work under her hat, the place closed

its doors.

A sharp elbow gently jogged Nurse from her musings. "You okay?" Sound whispered.

"Oh . . . fine," she mumbled, the air trilling past her teeth. She finished gathering up the stacks of chips and held them tightly in her gloved hand.

"Let's start with a few slots; maybe it'll help calm the nerves," Sound said above the clamor of the Casino. They weaved their way across the room. Taking up a corner position, Nurse deposited the chips in her purse and they leisurely began feeding a quarter slot.

Just then a tall, handsome black man in his mid-fifties strutted through the front door, carrying a dark, leather briefcase. His outfit was typical Vegas-cool—a pair of dark dress slacks and a deep jade-colored shirt, partly unbuttoned to show off a gold chain suspended from his thick neck. His face was clean-shaven, except for an impeccably-trimmed goatee, peppered with gray. His head shaven, it reflected the flashing lights that bordered the ceiling entrance.

"Let's move over there," suggested Sound, motioning to another bank of slots. "I'll go get some more change."

Nurse hobbled over to another stool and propped herself up on its cushion. In a few minutes Sound returned with a plastic bucket filled with one-dollar tokens. Nurse opened her purse and gave him half of her chips. Then she went back to feeding the slot machine.

Within a few minutes Sound was parked on a toilet seat in the men's room, transferring the cash and chips into a briefcase that had been slid under the partition from the neighboring stall. He snapped the case shut, slid it back to the adjacent commode, flushed the toilet, and returned to the casino, where Nurse was still playing her one-armed bandit.

In the meantime, after a minute had elapsed, Cap'n stood, towering above the stall door, gazing at his sweaty reflection in the bathroom mirror. He flushed his own toilet and exited the stall. Standing at the sink, he tucked the case under his arm and doused his hands and face with water. Large rings of sweat had formed under each arm pit. He patted dry the slick, tender skin on his head. And another minute later he was back watching the winning numbers scroll across the Keno game's giant screen.

Sound leaned over to see inside Nurse's bucket, silently trying to calcu-

late how many tokens she had left. The Las Vegas Hilton touted 97% returns. That meant that, if the odds held true, the first time through she would have \$97.00 of her \$100.00 in change. The next round would return \$94.00, and so on until it was all gone. He lost track on the 25th time, and decided the math was toasting his tired brain.

Nurse mindlessly kept depositing the coins in the slot, remembering back to the first time she ever saw Eddie. He'd pulled up behind the vacant laundry business in a shiny new '49 Ford pickup, its bed jammed with suitcases, gym equipment and trophies. For six long years, since the death of his wife, he'd taken his anger out on his opponents in the ring. When the anger was finally spent, he'd decided to take his winnings and open his own gym.

The young fighter had hopped out of the truck with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. It was a sight she would never forget. Having taken on too many fighters, now he was ready to take on the world. Sad-faced, six-year-old Marge had climbed down from the other side of the cab. Her small blanket dragging behind on the ground, her left thumb was firmly planted between her little lips, held by a suction force that only the power of love and security could pry loose.

By the time she arrived, little Marge had already missed her kindergarten year. Two months passed before Eddie actually met Marge's pair of new friends, Becky and Belle. Too busy training new fighters, he'd brushed off his daughter's tales of fun and adventure out back in the nearly abandoned garage. Marge was a shy girl who didn't make friends easily. He thought that the two "silly girls" she talked about constantly were only make-believe—and he was halfway right.

Now "little" Marge was a grown woman, married to a wealthy New York attorney and sitting at the foot of her daddy's hospital bed.

Nurse thought it ironic that at that very moment, she, an imposter, was gambling away money that Marge's own husband had earned.

Pretty soon, two hours had vanished, as had the bucket of coins. Nurse plunked the last few tokens in the bandit, then, mission accomplished, stood and wandered over to the blackjack table, where Cap'n was parked. Having settled his nerves by downing three large sodas, he'd watched the gamblers come and go, some walking away winners, others, losers. In time, he'd not only become versed in the game, but immersed in it. Now he was prepared to play for keeps. Placing his bet without a word, he waited for Nurse to lay down hers. Game after game,

the two reluctant leading actors played out their roles. Each time she wanted another card, she'd tap the table with her fingers. On one occasion, when Nurse won a sizeable amount of cash, Sound got a little too carried away, letting out a euphoric whoop. Still, gambling is gambling; it didn't take nearly as long to lose the thousand dollars in chips as it did the tokens.

As Cap'n dropped the last of his own chips on the table, Nurse and Sound walked over to the teller's window and cashed out, returning the last of the chips, collecting a second pile of cash, and hailed a cab.

In the safety of the back seat, Sound took a small pad of paper from his pocket and jotted down their take: *nine-thousand and change—Las Vegas Hilton*. Back at the casino, Cap'n made a second trip to the restroom—this time for legitimate reasons—then hailed a cab of his own to follow the leader.

The soup kitchen was closed until 5:00—or so said the sign on the door. Greg paced out front, trying to decide if he should ring the bell or just wait it out.

"I'm first in line," said a lone, rather ornery woman, who at first had appeared to be asleep in the shade of the front steps. "I'm savin' places for my friends, too," she added, her nasal rumblings charged with mistrust.

"Oh—I'm not looking to eat," Greg apologized.

"Then go 'round back. Reverend's in the kitchen," she said, pointing to the side of the building.

Greg disappeared around the corner and peeked through the open window. Inside the noisy kitchen, Cook, his back to the door, held a giant potato masher in his thick fist, smashing the 'hard' right out of a giant pot of spuds. The hot, moist air that escaped through the window screen clashed against the dry desert breeze that fluttered in the narrow, dead-end service alley. The clatter of chairs being set up echoed from the opposite doorway. Greg climbed the two steps to the landing and rapped his knuckles on the metal door frame. Cook reeled around like a wounded soldier, his masher cocked and ready to fire.

"Doors open at five!" he barked. "Go wait up front!"

"I-uh . . ." Greg stuttered.

"You heard me—wait up front." Cook started for the door. His masher whipped menacingly through the air, sending fragments of Idaho's best across the room.

Greg backed off the steps, ready to bolt. "Sunny," came the reverend's

voice. "I've been hoping you'd stop by." Like a spent wind-up toy, Cook halted his attack and returned to his riotous assault on the helpless spuds.

Reverend Keller chugged through the kitchen and extended a hand, lifting Greg back onto the landing. "Don't mind Cook," he chuckled, scarcely lowering his voice. "He's got a good heart. Just has to warm up to you, is all." His arm extended across his guest's back. His short legs doing double-time, he urged Greg inside. "I've heard some things," he said, his warm smile fading slightly. "You and some of my friends are in a pile of trouble."

Greg turned sharply to face the man. "What've you heard?"

"Two FBI agents came by this morning. Smitty led them here in order to ditch them."

"Behind that dumb exterior, the guy's a fox, isn't he?"

"I'd say he's gifted in some areas and not so gifted in others. Regardless, he's as innocent as a child."

"How much do the agents know?"

"Enough to get some people hurt." Reverend Keller paused. "You're playing a dangerous game against a powerful man."

"Vinnie?"

The reverend shook his head. "With a little help, Nurse can handle Vinnie Domenico. He's a coward that hides behind the skirts of fear and intimidation. He'll be easy to tumble. . . . Of course, you've already found that out, haven't you?"

Greg nodded. "Smitty and another friend were mostly responsible. They left Vinnie talking to himself."

"Yeah, they did a fine job. . . . No, Vinnie's small potatoes. But this other guy—well, you're flirting with danger messing with him, but it seems you and your friends really ticked Vinnie off. He put a price on your heads—over a hundred grand. A man that's used to keeping others in total submission can't rule when someone takes the legs out from under him. And that's what your friend did."

"A hundred grand?"

The reverend nodded, then added, "I know one old woman who'd give the rags off her own back to keep a soul worth saving out of trouble. That tells me that your friend must be worth the hassle."

"She already did that," Greg said, flashing an embarrassed smile. "—clear to the boxer shorts."

As Greg recited the dramatic love scene that had played out in the alley between him and Nurse, great gusts of laughter echoed out into the still

empty mess hall.

FORTY-TWO

THE OLD AUDI LOOKED STRANGELY in place, parked under the abandoned canopy of Three Queens. So did its driver-gambler. Bino sucked the last bit of smoke from his cigarette and dropped the butt on the asphalt, crushing it with the sole of his loafer. He peered across Bridger to the cream sedan parked at the curb, its driver focused on his every move. One lone guard stood inside the vacant casino. He unlocked the glass entry door to let Bino inside.

Locking the door once more, the guard, without so much as a word, ran his hands up and down Bino's slender frame to check for anything resembling a threat to the big man on the 13th floor. "Middle elevator," he muttered upon completing his search.

Bino made his way across the dormant lobby, his oxygen cart in tow. At the elevator, he pressed a nicotine-stained finger on the call button and drew a fresh cigarette from his shirt pocket. By the time the elevator doors opened to the upper level, half of the stick had gone up in smoke, gray clouds that billowed from the car.

Vinnie's cloistered figure slumped behind the massive desk. His back was to the elevator. The room's blinds were drawn tight, the faint shadows a better medium for the wise guy to stare at the empty screen of his desktop monitor. Turning, he reached into his desk drawer and tossed a Polaroid photo onto the floor at Bino's feet. "Cute girl," he said as he propped his feet up.

Bino bent down and picked up the picture. Behind its glossy surface was the image of his little girl, taped to a chair. Her face was streaked with tears, her pajamas wet from the waist down. The gambler swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. Then, tempting fate, he dropped his still-smoldering butt on the white carpet and crushed it out. "The kid's wife . . . visits the Heritage . . . Care Center on . . . Friday nights. . . . She hasn't been to work . . . all week."

"Good boy," Vinnie sneered triumphantly. "I'll give you a bone and

let her live another day.”

Like a whipped dog, Bino turned and hightailed it to the elevator. When it hit bottom and Bino bolted from the car, a squatty man in a wrinkled suit stood waiting to enter. He passed with a casual, “Good day, mate,” and disappeared behind the shutting doors.

The guard unlocked the glass doors and motioned Vinnie’s distraught visitor out onto the street. As Bino steered the smoky Audi onto Bridger, the cream sedan tailed close behind. The washed-up gambler slowed to a stop at 3rd, yanked the photo from his shirt pocket, took one last look at his poor, sweet Angelina, and flung it out the window. The light turned green, the restless traffic pressed forward. The miserable photograph, tossed to the wind, fluttered about in the middle of the crosswalk.

Cook had brought two plates of food into the back office and was now shouting orders to the vanishing crowd. “You!” Greg could hear him snarl. “And you!” He could picture Cook’s spoon shaking at a cowering, disheveled diner trying to shovel the last of his potatoes in his mouth. It seems if you didn’t make it out the door in time, you’d just volunteered for clean-up duty.

“I take what the Good Lord gives me,” the reverend said, referring to his crusty chef. He slid open the desk drawer and pulled out a business card. “But they still come to eat.”

Greg stacked his plate on top of the reverend’s. “He’s a good cook,” he said appreciatively.

Reverend Keller leaned forward and took in a deep breath. “I think what you’re doing might work, but if you want my help I need to give the Feds a token so they’ll believe what I tell them.”

“Agreed.” Greg fidgeted with the forks atop the food-spotted plates.

The retired plumber leaned back in his chair and stroked his chin. It was as though he could see into Greg’s fractured heart. “That’s not the reason you came to see me, though, is it?”

Greg started to get up. “You’ve already done enough . . .”

“Please,” said Reverend Keller. “The temporal help is just that—only temporary. If you don’t work out the other problems—the mental, the emotional, the spiritual—the cycle will start all over again. I see it everyday. Most of the people who come here can’t or won’t be helped.” Greg sank back in his seat. “You miss her, don’t you?” he asked, point-blank.

“I’ve caused more heartache to my family and friends than I can ever

undo.”

“I’m sure you feel that way. In fact, I read the letter you started to write.” Greg looked up, perplexed. “I retrieved it. And, with your permission, of course, I’d like to send it to your wife. I’d enclose a letter of my own. . . .” The room grew quiet. Only the rattle and clank of pots and pans pealed in the background. The recollection of his heartfelt apology stroked the corners of Greg’s mind. “Have you ever been able to tell her those things in person?”

Greg shook his head. “She was always too angry to listen, and I was always too proud, too bullheaded.”

“Sometimes a little distance and time can jumpstart the healing of even the biggest wound. When someone becomes so mad at what you’ve done to her, it shows she still cares. It could be because she still loves you as much as you do her.”

Greg lowered his head, contemplating the matter.

“Hey, it couldn’t hurt—and it could help,” the reverend added. “If there’s hope of patching things up, it’s a good place to start.”

Hard-pressed to argue with that kind of logic, Greg struggled for something to say. “Thank you,” is what came out. He felt a soft tingling in his scalp—perhaps the sign of a new glimmer of hope sprouting in his own desperate mind and heart.

“You’re welcome. . . . Now let’s help Cook clean up and I’ll give you and your guest that ride we’ve been talking about.”

Smitty lay on the park bench, sound asleep. His leg twitched occasionally, the dreams of a street-mutt. Smitty, though, was more like a street-smart puppy, innocent yet still wise to the ways of the street. And the pup had already learned well the art of chasing cats: Never get close enough to get scratched and always get the cat on the run before giving chase.

The agents had grown tired of his childlike games. Something had to give—or they’d go crazy. He’d out-dueled them in the park, in the soup kitchen, and in general. They’d visited with Barnes to complain, and to explain that the mute was less than cognizant of his surroundings. Barnes finally had agreed to call off the chase, perhaps to pick it up at a later hour. Their mark could easily be pinpointed again, electronically, since the chip was still secure in Smitty’s back pocket.

A half block from the apartment, Mitch also lay on a bus-stop bench,

surveying from under his sweaty baseball cap the comings and goings of the various tenants and visitors to and from their apartment building. He fidgeted nervously with each new arrival. The thought of recovering his GTO had invigorated him, had provided a brief shot of life to the lazy afternoon. Trusting Bino's word was the risky part. If the warehouse was where he said it was, the goat's rescue would be as simple as getting in—which was no longer that simple.

With Smitty still at large, the risk was still too great for the Alley Team to remain at the apartment. If the mute was followed back home, all who were there would be taken into custody. What's more, Mike's body again needed to be moved—and soon. The dry ice was almost gone; and the layers of blankets didn't help anyone in the apartment keep their cool, except Mike.

Nurse, Cap'n and Sound, meanwhile, were working their third casino, wielding their third fraudulent credit card. Cap'n had stashed over sixteen-thousand in bills in his briefcase. The little gang kept up the appearance of being regular, pleasure-seeking gamblers, dropping small change in the slots and acting out the suitable win or lose response. In fact, they'd become quite adept at walking away with hardly a shrug when one of the one-armed bandits took their coins.

By now at County Hospital, Grandpa's festering gruff and grumble had given his caretakers a case of burnout. Of course, his lack of supplemental insurance was a contributing factor in his imminent discharge. The treaty included the compromise that he'd stay one more night in the hospital, then that he would let an in-home nurse come to his home for the first several days until he was back on his feet. Despite the complications it might cause and the already overburdened state it was in, the agency agreed to assign their own male nurse to the job.

And in a secure location in the suburbs, Agent Sutton had successfully cleared Stephanie and Maggie to make their regular Friday night visit to Heritage Care. Though reluctant, Barnes had finally approved a two-hour visit for the next day. Both women were elated. Unable to go anywhere for an entire day, the safe-house was beginning to feel more like a prison.

Of all the players in this tangled Vegas floor show, it was Ritter who considered himself its star. After standing for a full 15 minutes, waiting to be whisked up to the 13th-floor penthouse, he found himself between a rock and an even bigger stone—namely, smack dab in the

middle of Frankie and Vinnie. All three men stood peering out the window. Ritter coolly turned to his host and said, "I been followed mate. Looks like you got a few on your doorstep, too."

Vinnie cursed, gulped the last of a drink he held in his hand, then launched a rage bordering on a temper tantrum. "You think I don't know that! I been cooped up by a punk kid, my hotel's shut down, my car's stolen, and he's out there laughin' at me. . . . He's gotta pay, or I won't have an ounce a' respect left."

"Maybe I can help," Ritter said with a smirk. "You're the man, an' you already set it up, if I seen it right. Let's say I give the Feds Agent Hales' body and you give 'em the gun, then the whole thing might just take a trip. Evidence shows up from two different sources, they'll stop lookin' at you and concentrate on the kid."

Vinnie sank into the couch and propped his feet on the coffee table. His turbulent three-day rant had not only taken its toll on his psyche, but had blown his initial plan way off track. "Yeah. . . . You're pretty smart, Ritter. That's what I had in mind all along." A wicked grin slid down Vinnie's face and rested comfortably on his lips.

"There's just one thing," Ritter said as an aside, "th' matter of me compensation?"

Vinnie shrugged his shoulders. "What'd you have in mind?"

"You wire fifty-grand to me bank, Selby in Yorkshire. It's called Midland Bank."

Vinnie swore again. "You think I'm stupid, givin' you the money before I got the goods?"

Ritter shook his head like a ruddy schoolmarm in front of a child. "Don't ya' see, mate, ya' got *me*. I ain't about to run. If I don't give up the goods, you still got me 'til I do. Just buy me a ticket and put me on the plane when we finish."

Vinnie plucked a bottle from off his desk and poured himself another shot of whiskey. "What do you think, Frankie?" he asked, turning to his silent partner. "Could you break his arms and legs without killin' him if he doesn't keep his end of the deal?"

"Whatever you say, Vinnie," Frankie mumbled as he cracked his knuckles and ran a huge hand across his short-cropped hair.

Ritter swallowed. Deep down, a sharp pain shot through his chest and twisted knots inside his gut. "Why don't you give me the gun and I'll stash it with the body?"

Vinnie burst out laughing, then gulped down another drink. “Over my dead body.”

“Just figurin’ you might want to keep a might clear a’ the whole mess . . .”

“Listen,” said Vinnie, in a tone suggesting their conversation was over, “I’ll wire your money in the morning. Then you’ll show me where the body is.”

“What ‘bout our friends out front?”

“I’ll worry about them. Now you run along and find yourself a room—have a good night’s sleep.”

Cheers!” Ritter turned and stepped into the elevator. Once its doors had shut, he reached over and inconspicuously pushed the button to the 3rd floor. He wasn’t quite done with his visit to Three Queens.

With the Englishman out of the way, up in the penthouse Vinnie poured himself another whiskey and sat down to consider his options. Finally he uttered the verdict: “I’ll kill him and leave his body with Mikey-the-cop’s rotting carcass. A double murder—what could be better? And the kid’ll get a five-year bonus for stealin’ my car.”

Frankie gave a chuckle. “Good idea, Vinnie. You show him. . . .”

“Thanks for the ride, Reverend,” Greg said,” *and* for all your help.” They shook hands through the van window.

“You better call me Bart. I think I’ve already stepped *way* outside the mantle of my calling.” The reverend took a glimpse at the big-screen box tucked in the back of the van, dry-ice smoke still falling from the bottom most cracks.

Greg seemed a bit chagrined. “I’d totally understand if you’ve changed your mind.”

“No,” the reverend said, waving him away. “I’ll take good care of your cargo. Consider this my part of the neighborhood cleanup.” He turned over the ignition. “Besides, I haven’t watched the tube in years.” Both men smiled. “I’ll send the letter to your wife in the morning. And Cook and I will do some work on my old refrigerator-freezer tonight—sort of empty it out. I think it’s about to break down.”

Reverend Keller pulled from the parking lot just as Smitty came walking up the sidewalk. The mute smiled and waved proudly as the van rounded the corner and disappeared.

Greg scanned the street. There was no one else around. Still, Smitty

might have been followed. "You okay?" he asked. Smitty merely sauntered up to the apartment door, nodded, and flailed his arms behind him as if to say, *Can't you see I'm alone?*

"We've got to get you out of sight. You don't think you were followed?" Smitty shook his head.

"Come on. Lightning's packing up our things as we speak. We're moving out. The place is too hot." As the slow-moving elevator made its way up to the building's 5th floor, Smitty tried to explain how he'd eluded the agents in the park with his childish antics. Greg, however, was so concerned with being nailed that he didn't pay much attention. A sick feeling washed over him; the pit of his stomach felt like it was filled with cold lead. He led Smitty out of the elevator car, shoved the key in the door, and jostled him inside. "Lightning, Smitty's back," he hollered.

Mitch strode from the bathroom, carrying the last of the toiletries. He hurried over to the tattered couch and dropped them in a bag. The grin on his face was as big as Smitty's. "Hey, guy, you made it!" He seized the mute by the shoulders and gave him a shake.

Smitty nodded enthusiastically.

"Were you followed?" Suddenly the same surge of alarm came over Mitch.

Smitty shook his head.

Greg leapt to the window and peered down through the blinds. "I don't see anybody out of the ordinary," he said under his breath.

Mitch tossed Smitty a change of clothes. "Here, put these on," he urged. "And make it quick."

The mute immediately kicked off his shoes and jerked down his suspenders, yanking the pants off his gangly legs. As the trousers hit the carpet, so did the dime-size chip he'd carried in his back pocket. He paused and stared down at the odd-looking coin, a little larger than a dime. Curious, he picked it up.

Mitch was already at the door, ready to leave. "What're you doing, Smitty? We've gotta go."

"Greg turned from the window and eyed the strange object Smitty was holding between his fingers. "What's that?"

Smitty hunched his shoulders and pointed to the pants pocket. Greg hurled himself across the room and snatched the trinket from Smitty's grasp. Giving it a hard stare, he used his fingernail to peel the plastic coating from its surface. "It's a computer chip!" he said with a gasp.

Mitch swung the door closed and snatched the miniature transmitter from Greg's outstretched palm, turning it side to side. Greg lunged back to the window, then exclaimed, "We've got a van down in the lot! It's got some sort of retriever dish on the roof."

"Blast!" bellowed Mitch as he scurried toward the bathroom. Smitty began to dance around the floor in a mad struggle to pull on the other pair of pants.

Still at the window, Greg kept up his play-by-play narrative. "Two guys are climbing from the van. They're holding an antenna . . ."

Inside the bathroom the toilet flushed. Mitch watched the water rise in the bowl, then swirl down through the porcelain throat and gush down four stories of pipes. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the tumbling chip sink back to the bottom of the bowl. It wouldn't flush!

"They're coming inside!" called Greg. "What should we do?"

With a loud splash, Mitch plunged his hand down into the toilet bowl. Sweeping wildly with his fingers, he felt for the pesky little chip. "I can't reach it!" he hollered.

Greg rushed into the room. "Let me try." He, too, tried to squeeze his fingers into the small opening. "I can't either!"

Smitty peered into the room. Dropping his leather bag of tools on the floor, he took out a small mechanical cable. "Good job, Smitty," Mitch said as he yanked the pronged device free and inserted it into the stained commode. Using a backward motion, he churned at the brackish water. "There . . . I think I got it."

Greg scrounged through the bag of toiletries and pulled out a roll of toilet paper. "Here, wrap it up."

Mitch lifted the tiny gadget from the toilet and ran paper around it in both directions. Then he pulled the flush lever and tossed the little snitch back into the swirling water. "It won't take long," he said, "for them to figure out what we did."

"You check the door, I'll catch the window," Greg said, racing back to the closed blinds.

Mitch cracked the door and eyed the elevator call button. The bell rang and Mitch pushed the door shut and bolted the lock. Pressing his ear to the door, he listened to the voices in the hallway. "He's moving again," he heard one of them say.

"Where to?"

"He must've used the stairs; he's headed down."

“Don’t lose him!” one of the men said. “You take the stairs, I’ll get the elevator.”

Mitch turned to Greg. In a whisper, he said, “I figure we’ve got a couple of minutes to get out.” He heard the elevator doors shut. “As soon as they find their smart little stool pigeon, they’ll be back, asking lots of questions.”

By this time Smitty had pulled on his laceless work boots and was tugging his pant legs down over the tops. He began to strap his pouch to his waist, when he heard Greg ask, “You have the cash?” Thinking the question was directed at him, he wagged his head.

Mitch held up a single suitcase. “Got it,” he said, shaking its contents. “Everything else stays.”

“Agreed.” Greg let his peephole crack in the blinds close. “They’re back out on the street.”

“Let’s take the stairs.” The three men crept out of the apartment and down the hall. By the time they reached the 3rd floor, one of the agents’ voices was again heard coming up the stairwell, hollering into his radio. “Send back-up. We’ll stop on every floor. He can’t get past. . . .”

The men scrambled from the stairwell into the hallway and Mitch rapped on the first door he came to. After a few seconds of quiet, Smitty pulled his pick set from his pouch and inserted it in the lock, jiggled it around, and popped it open. The three men cowered inside. The sound of flowing bathwater came from inside a second door. “Honey, is that you?” a woman’s voice echoed from the bathroom. The water turned off.

Three faces glowered in the direction of the door; the tension in the air almost cried out to be heard. Mitch locked the outside door and motioned the others down the hallway toward the bedroom. Just as they passed the bathroom door, it opened. “Honey, you home?” the woman called again. Once more the bathroom door closed. Greg skulked the rest of the way into the bedroom and parted the curtain that looked out over the parking lot. “We’ve got another car,” he whispered. “And two more men.”

Smitty squinched up his eyes, as if trying to make the whole thing go away.

“They’ll know our apartment number in a few minutes,” replied Mitch. “Maybe we can still get past. Here’s an idea. If we can get down to the 2nd floor and get into a back apartment, we can drop from the

deck and take off. There are only four agents to get past.”

Greg nodded his assent. “If we wait too long there’ll be thirty.”

Smitty opened his eyes and pointed a finger at his chest, then stuck it up to his throat like he was cutting it with a knife.

“It’s okay, Smitty. You didn’t know you were bugged,” Mitch whispered.

Smitty shook his head and thrust his arms forward as if they were cuffed. He again pointed at his chest, and then at the door.

“You want to give yourself up?” asked Mitch.

The mute gave a nod.

This time it was Mitch who shook his head. “No way; I need you. Bino told me where my car is. I need you to come help me get it back.”

Greg held up a finger. “One of us getting caught, though—it’s not a bad idea,” he mused. “But this time it’s my turn. I’ll refuse to talk and get a lawyer.”

“No!” Mitch pleaded. “We can get out.”

Determined, Greg headed for the apartment door. “My part’s finished. With a little luck, I’ll see you in a couple of days. Give me two minutes—I’ll draw them out to the parking lot.” The door closed behind him.

Greg made his way back to the stairwell and started down. Halfway between the first and second floors, he casually nodded at an agent flashing past him up the stairs. “Good afternoon,” he smiled, and continued on down.

The agent marched up three more steps, then stopped short and took a folded paper from his pocket. Opening it, he stared at two images: a thumbnail sketch and an old photo. “I’ve got Hart in the stairs!” he shouted into his radio. “He’s headed for the main floor.”

The thundering of footsteps sounded from below. Shouts to “stop—lay face-down on the ground” followed. Apartment doors opened; curious tenants peeked out into the hallway. Mitch, putting on his best look of bewilderment, motioned to Smitty and they, too, stuck their heads out the apartment door. Then, pulling Smitty along, he rushed down the stairs to the 2nd floor. Smitty crouched behind his hero and fumbled with the lock to #205. Just then the door to #207 opened, and a man poked his head into the corridor. “What’s going on?” he asked.

Mitch tilted his head in the direction of the parking lot. “The cops just arrested some guy out front for kidnapping. They sent us inside. Two others are on the loose, somewhere in the building.” This time he intention-

ally put on some not-very-convincing airs. He spoke in a rattled tone and smeared a funny, cartoonish smile on his face. With any luck the guy knew his neighbor and would figure out that he and Smitty *were* the 'loose' one of whom he spoke. But it didn't matter. In three more minutes they'd be over the back fence and picking the lock to one of the neighbor's cars. From then on the cops would be turning an apartment inside out, trying to ferret out two more dangerous fugitives, only to come up empty handed.

FORTY-THREE

NURSE COLLAPSED INTO BED, EXHAUSTED. It was just past midnight. The elegant 8th-floor room at the Palace Hotel and Casino had a connecting door leading into Sound's adjacent room. Cap'n, entering the hotel some minutes after them, had landed a room on the 11th floor. Behind a drawn set of luxurious curtains, a big picture window overlooked the Strip.

After putting away his things, Cap'n took the elevator to the 8th floor, hesitantly made his way down the corridor to Nurse's room, and knocked. Nurse gaped through the door at the dark, brooding eyes on the other side of the peephole. She opened the door and shooed him inside. "What th' crup ya' doin', Cap'n?"

The man's pained expression darkened even more. "I figured we better count the cash. Don't feel good holdin' all this money, you know?"

Nurse waved him away with a weary hand. "Ain't nobody I'd rather have hold it. Now . . ."

At that moment Sound came through the adjoining door, wrapped in a white terrycloth robe and drying his thin crop of hair with a fluffy bath towel. "Oh, hi, Cap'n," he greeted. "We did real good today. By my calculations we took in over a hundred-grand." Like Nurse, he too was feeling a bit flushed from the long day. Over and above that, his ribs were more than a bit sore where Cap'n had elbowed him the day before. He was having trouble breathing.

Cap'n persisted, "Well I'd like to count it."

"Ya' knows they got cameras in th' hallways," Nurse admonished. "Somebody mighta' seen ya' come t' my room."

"Did you take any money out?" asked Sound, pondering his own agenda.

"No, but I ain't never seen this much money in one place in all my life," Cap'n whimpered. "It makes me feel like runnin' away."

“Man, you don’t run from nothin’,” exclaimed Nurse. “But if’n you’d feel better, ya’ can sleep in my extra bed.”

Cap’n expelled a heavy sigh and went to put the briefcase he held under his arm on the chest of drawers. He paused a moment to let Nurse transfer her dentures from the cabinet top to the top drawer. “How much more do we need?” he queried.

“Eddie said the cards were good for a quarter-of-a-million,” Sound said.

Cap’n gave a noiseless whistle and, digging a napkin from his back pocket, wiped the sweat from his shiny head. “I ain’t sure I can take it that long,” he sighed. “I ain’t been under this kinda pressure in forty years.”

Nurse pulled her dress up over her head and lay it at the foot of the bed. “I ain’t got no pj’s, so you boys’ll just hafta’ put up with me in a slip.” Sliding a hanger through the gossamer fabric, she hung it in the closet and crawled into bed for a second time that night. “Now you two stop flappin’ your jaws so’s I can get some rest.”

Sound retreated to his own room and Cap’n stripped down to his briefs. By the time his head had hit the pillow, the whistling air coursing through Nurse’s crooked nose was singing sweet lullabies, music that indeed soothed the savage worries in the big man’s breast.

Clint’s blue sports car sat out in front of the large warehouse, located in the business district just off Craig. A ways down the street, the car Mitch had stolen was tucked squarely behind a row of garbage trucks lined up tightly against the building. They would most likely start off on their appointed routes a little before dawn. Mitch could imagine the cussing and carrying on of their drivers when they showed up to work to find their trucks blocked in. Then, once the nature of the bothersome car was revealed, first the police would be called in and then the FBI would show up to take prints. By the end of the day, all of them would be scratching their heads, wondering why the auto had been left in such an unusual spot.

“Bino told me the truth for a change,” Mitch whispered. “That blue one’s Clint’s car.” Smitty didn’t need to be told. He’d seen the sleek convertible at the gym on many occasions.

The warehouse had but a single outside lock. The only way in or out was at the main entrance, near where Clint’s car was parked. After

ditching the stolen car in the most conspicuous spot, both men had circled the building like two Indian braves, and now were slumped up against the neighboring building, awaiting their chance.

An old Dodge with blackened windows was parked next to the blue ragtop. Mitch moseyed over and casually placed a hand on the hood of each car. "Clint's is still hot; he hasn't been here long," he said. "But this old piece of junk hasn't moved since last night."

Smitty, feeling the scalding air pour out from under the Vette's hood, raised his eyebrows, obviously impressed by Mitch's deductive powers. The apprentice sleuth stuck his nose down by the front of the engine and sniffed in the hot air. Then he did the same with the older car.

Mitch scanned the warehouse's deserted perimeter. "It looks like we'll have to go right through the front door." Smitty plucked his tools from his belt and the two of them stepped to the dimly lit doorway, then paused as they stared at the coded keypad on the lock. "Er . . . and maybe not."

Unable to gain entrance into the building, Smitty turned his attention on the Dodge. A scant three minutes later, he was curled up asleep in its back seat while Mitch lay in the reclined passenger seat. They'd discussed a simple plan of action for when the car's owner climbed behind the wheel.

Mitch struggled to stay awake as the hours ticked slowly by: 1:20 . . . 2:09 . . . 2:14 . . . Smitty tossed and turned in back, occasionally twitching an arm or a leg. By three a.m. Mitch had started to get nervous. The day's first vehicles arrived on the lifeless, dead-end street, pulling into the parking lot of the waste management business next door. The drivers would stop for their morning coffee and then be ready to hustle their massive garbage-eating trucks out onto the Vegas streets. He sat up and reached for the door handle, when suddenly the front door to the warehouse clicked open. Clint stepped out into the semi-cool early-morning air and dusted a light spray of shredded paper shavings from his tight-fitting jeans.

Careful to remain out of sight, Mitch eased his seat once more into the recline position. From behind him, Smitty stirred, then stretched his gangly arms into the air, striking the back window with his hands. Mitch reached back and coaxed the flailing arms down. "Shh," he cautioned. Smitty's eyes blinked hard as he struggled to rouse from his stupor.

Thirty seconds after Clint came out, a second man, sporting a straggly mane of hair, stalked from the building. He removed a pair of reading glasses from his face and stuffed them in his pocket. The two men had been clash-

ing, it was clear, their feud spilling out onto the dock. Now they exchanged several more pungent words. Clint slammed shut the warehouse door and set the code. The ex-fighter was first to climb in his car. Gunning its powerful engine and thrusting it in first gear, the sporty coupe peeled from the parking lot. In contrast to his hotheaded companion, the other man was in no hurry to leave. Lingered in the shadows, he lit up a cigarette.

Mitch waited as the man took a number of long drags on the smoke. Finally, he pulled his keys from his pants pocket. But instead of coming to the car, he turned back to the warehouse and reached down into one of the garbage cans near the front door. After sifting through its contents, he finally came up holding what looked like a shoe box in his hand. He peered back and forth in the darkness, then strolled over to the Dodge. Smitty eased a ratchet from his pouch and slouched to the floor behind the driver's seat.

Mitch, after taking in a deep breath to calm his nerves, lay stock-still in the darkness. The car door opened and the man slid inside. Smitty sprang up from behind and pressed the ratchet handle against the back of the man's stork-like neck. "If you don't want your brains splattered on the windshield, do exactly as I tell you," Mitch said in his most menacing voice.

The man was an easy mark. "Clint told me to do it," he yammered.

"Put both hands on the wheel." The man did as ordered. Sliding the box from the sniveler's lap, Mitch opened its lid and peered inside. "You're going to open the door now and get us inside."

"I-I don't know the code."

"Just shoot him, Smitty, and we'll crash the car through the garage door." Mitch opened his door and climbed from the vehicle, still holding the box.

"Okay, okay, I'll get you in," said the man. He cautiously got out of the car, with Smitty on his heels.

"What's your name?" Mitch demanded.

"Ivan . . . Ivan Lions."

"Well, Ivan, it looks to me you've got enough information here to sink the ship."

"Life insurance."

"Right. Insurance. . . . Say, Ivan, you scared?"

"You aren't?" Ivan punched in the code on the lock.

"Nah, Vinnie's a pussycat. I'm the guy to be afraid of—the one who shut

him down.

Ivan flicked on the lights and turned his head to address his principal captor. "Been hopin' I'd meet you. I heard Vinnie's got a price on you." He went to remove the glasses from his shirt pocket. Smitty jammed the wrench deeper into the scrawny back. "Easy, bud, I'm unarmed. I'm just the talent. I hate the violent crap."

The man was in his early 50s, with hair that looked as if he'd just crawled out of bed and a wrinkled wardrobe to match. His eyes were swollen and drowsy-looking. At Mitch's request, Smitty ran his hands up and down the man's body to check for a weapon.

"What do you do for Vinnie?" Mitch continued.

"Nothing, anymore. Just officially closed up shop." It appeared that Ivan's nerves were beginning to mellow.

The men stepped from the small foyer into a room piled deep in shredded paper. Rows of empty file cabinets, their drawers half open, lined the wall. Computers lay among the debris, smashed to pieces. Smitty turned and stared through a window, where there were piled an assortment of new appliances, home entertainment systems, electronic equipment, and furniture, most still in their boxes.

"Looks like the operation under Eddie's gym I heard about," Mitch said.

"I told Clint we should've shut it down six months ago. Ran too long."

Mitch walked into the warehouse and flipped on the lights. The blue glow of the halogens slowly illuminated the room. The warm reflection of the gold GTO, parked snugly in one corner, quickened Mitch's pulse and warmed his heart. Smitty lowered his wrench and smiled a wide, cheesy grin as he glanced between Mitch and the golden prize.

"She's a beauty," Ivan said. "I'd have taken her with me, if I thought you'd leave well enough alone. But I reckoned that within a few days that car would be hotter than Hades."

"Mike's life wasn't worth it," Mitch said, "but I'm still glad to have it back."

Ivan reached out expectantly. "If you'll give me my box now, I'll be on my way."

"I don't think so," Mitch smiled. "It's time these people got their lives back—just like me."

A strangely relaxed camaraderie had hedged itself between Mitch and Ivan over the brief, five-minute stretch. Ivan gauged Mitch, admiringly. "I'm no saint like you, kid. But I have to admit, it'll be fun watchin' the headlines. A couple of days' head start, I figure maybe two more years until the laws put me out of business. But if I play my cards right, I can still retire like a king."

"Not in this town, I hope."

"You kiddin'? Have you seen the news reports?"

"Can't say I have."

"Roy nailed the senator, the governor and two of your congressmen. I'll be as far away from here as I can get." Ivan punched the button on the overhead door.

"Roy?" Mitch asked.

"Some loser used to work for me. With what you've got in that box, Mr. Domenico will be wishin' he'd never met you." Ivan ducked under the door, then stuck his head back inside and said, "And next time, use an extension instead of a ratchet. It makes a better gun barrel."

Outside, the old Dodge disappeared into the early-morning shadows, its driver hiding behind the smoked-glass windows and still carrying enough false identification to buy his way to a 20-year prison term.

Mitch sank into the familiar seat of the GTO and pumped the gas. "You ever driven a car before?" he asked Smitty, who was fidgeting expectantly in the passenger seat. The mute shook his head. "If we get through this in one piece, I'll teach you."

Smitty fondled the dashboard, running his fingers along the smooth curves. Mitch fired up the monstrous engine. It roared to life, sucking air through the triple carburetors extending up out of the hood. "It's no Ferrari," Mitch yelled over the rumble, "but I gave her life. Rebuilt it with my own hands." He cranked the wheel and, maneuvering forward, then backward, eased the car from the warehouse. Smitty hopped out and cranked down the overhead door.

At the front of the line of garbage trucks, two of their drivers had looped a tow chain around the stolen car's bumper. A third man sat behind the wheel of one of the monsters, poised to drag the car from its resting place. With all the legal hoopla they'd had to go through, they'd be late getting out on their routes.

Seeing the GTO idle onto the street, one of the waiting drivers called out, "Hit it!" Mitch did just that, launching the muscle car out onto the open

road, headed for a junkyard.

Barnes and Horne with a half-dozen other agents, each packing an automatic weapon, crouched under the canopy of Three Queens. Each agent had on a bulletproof vest, a blue windbreaker pulled over the top with the white letters FBI stenciled boldly front and back.

“Open up!” Barnes yelled at the sleeping guard. He hammered on the glass door with his fist.

The guard wobbled to his feet and came to the door, blinking and bewildered. “What do you want?” he mumbled.

Horne slapped a folded document up to the glass. “Warrant! Open up!”

The guard cranked the prehistoric brass lock and stepped aside, then pulled his radio from his hip. The agents burst through the opening, Barnes yelling instructions as they went. “Cover the exits; make sure he doesn’t get out.”

“Mr. Domenico, Mr. Domenico,” the guard hollered into his unit. “We’ve got Federal agents coming in the building. They’re searching the place. They’ve got a warrant.”

When Horne heard the word “warrant,” he snatched the radio away from the stunned guard. “Shut up!” he ordered. He pressed the radio’s transmit button. “The warrant’s for a Trenton Ritter,” he called out, clarifying the matter. “The charge is arson. We know he’s somewhere in the building. We’re here to take him in.” He could just imagine the havoc he’d incited at that instant on the 13th floor.

Indeed, upstairs, Vinnie stumbled from his bed and rifled through the small fridge in his office bar.

And twenty minutes later, Ritter, in handcuffs, was being escorted from Three Queens. In meeting with the agents, Vinnie swore he’d have the money-grubbing stoolpigeon out on bail within the hour—and swore even louder that his attorney would shut the agency down for harassment.

Out on the street, Horne eased Ritter’s head below the roof line of the Ford sedan and buckled him in. Then he climbed in front and Barnes pulled away. “How’s the finger?” he asked, cool as can be.

“How d’ya *think* it feels, mate? Feels like it’s been bloody chopped off, that’s how. Don’t hurt as bad as me bloody head though.”

Horne chatted on. “Yeah, Vincent’s old man used to use the same MO. At least four of the guys’ bodies the Agency found roasting out in the desert

off the highway had part of a pinky missing. Yup, that's how he kept his people in line . . ."

Only a mile down the street Barnes pulled over and Horne climbed out to unlatch the cuffs from Ritter's arms. "I ain't guilty a' no fire," he parroted for at least the sixth time. Horne, suddenly speechless, merely refastened the man's seatbelt and climbed back in front. Once the vehicle had gotten up to speed, Horne reached back over the seat, the warrant in hand. "This warrant is blank," he confessed.

Ritter, clearly considering himself the poster boy for abuse of every kind, shape and form, shot Horne an annoyed glare. "So what's this all about then?"

The agents looked at each other, then Barnes began to explain. "We did a little research on that shortened pinky of yours. Agent Horne, here, was giving it to you straight. When Vinnie's old man chopped off someone's finger it was the mark of a very short life. We couldn't find a single man who lived to tell about it."

"I'm still here, ain't I?"

"For now. It's just a matter of time." Barnes then threw out a seed he knew would germinate. "We thought you ought to know we have authorization to pay you fifty-grand for Mike's body. If it's where you say it is, that is."

Ritter glanced back and forth between the two faces in the front seat. "What if I give you the murder weapon, too?"

"Lets go back to the office and talk."

Smitty had found heaven on earth. Having made immediate friends with the brutish pack of junkyard dogs, it was like he'd been accepted as part of the gang. He would jump around and play with them, his tongue hanging down, matching the mongrel bunch's every action. While man and beast romped in the dawning morn, Mitch pulled the GTO into the dingy paint booth and locked the door. When he turned the corner of the shed, back to the gravel parking lot, he came upon a sight both amazing and amusing. The dogs were all sitting on their haunches in a neat row. Their eyes were trained on Smitty, who loomed like some bizarre choir director in front.

"How'd you do that?" Mitch asked, clearly puzzled. More than once over the years he'd tried to control the canine mob, if not to actually train them, at least to tame them of their high-strung antics. But he'd never even

gotten past “Okay, run around and bark as much as you want!”; and the “sit” command was out of the question. The pack mentality had always won out.

Now here they were, eagerly surrendering to Smitty’s beck and call. Hearing the approach of their young master, the dogs’ gaze met Mitch’s, then quickly turned back to Smitty, ears perked, eyes attentive. The mute sent a series of tiny blasts of air through his rotting teeth, sporadic, shrill, whistle-type screeches. The oldest of the pack raised his head and let out a howl. The other five, one by one, jumped on the bandwagon, sending an eerie, high-pitched dirge out across the metal boneyard.

When Smitty’s whistles stopped, the dogs stopped howling. A pleased grin flooded the man’s face. His voice had no doubt been heard, listened to, and obeyed. Mitch was equally delighted. “That was cool, Smitty. I’ve never seen them obey anyone like that—not even Grandpa.” Thrilled with his triumph, Smitty hunkered onto the ground, letting the mongrels wash over him in a manic display of dog dribble.

Mitch gazed down on the display of human bliss. “You haven’t had much sleep, Smitty. I’ve been thinking of a safe place for you to stay while I’m gone.” The new leader of the pack stopped his cavorting and got to his feet. A look of despair followed by a rapid series of hand signals told Mitch that he wanted to go as well. Mitch wouldn’t hear of it. “Grandpa will be coming home from the hospital either today or tomorrow. I need you here to keep an eye on him. He’d object to having you here, so I don’t want him to even know you’re around. You be like . . .” Mitch paused to think, “like the phantom of the junkyard.”

The idea brought a smile to Smitty’s lips. He shot a menacing glance around the enclosure, his eyes dancing back and forth in their sockets.

“A key is on a hook under the front steps,” Mitch continued. “You’ll need it if the trailer’s locked. Scrounge yourself up something to eat. And there’s a pretty nice wreck out in the northwest corner of the yard. I used to play race car in it when I was a kid. You can sleep in that.”

The adventure ahead proved too inviting for Smitty to remain focused. Before you could say “lickety-split,” he was off to explore the nooks and crannies of the expansive compound.

Turning to more pressing matters, Mitch fired up the loader and bounced his way between row upon row of cars, some flattened, some rusty relics.

Just past the row with a dark green Vega on the end, he veered right and gunned the loader all the way to the shed. Making another right, he entered the building, started the old diesel to the crusher, backed up, scooped up his prize and started toward the wrecker.

Ten minutes later, the red prize was tooling down I-15, chained to the bed of the tow-truck.

The atmosphere in the interview room was not nearly as explosive the second time around. It was, however, more frigid. The agents' questions were grim, somber. Although the investigation had made progress, the loss of the agent had hung a dark and humbling burden around the Agency's neck. Even Ritter—center of the stage, leading man, marquee player—seemed more accommodating, less arrogant. Still, he balked at their approach to the situation. "I promised him, mate. If I don't show, he won't go."

Barnes was adamant. "You turn over the body to us and we'll make that deposit in Midland Bank."

"I can't promise it's still where we put it. Besides, you need to get your hands on the gun, too."

A soft knock came at the door. A secretary stuck her head in the room. "Officers, Agent Field would like to see you."

Barnes and Horne started for the door. "We'll be back in a few minutes," grumbled Barnes.

"I'll catch me breath while I wait."

When the two agents entered the SAC's office, they found Field sitting next to a short, rather pudgy man. Both stood. "Reverend Keller," Field said in the way of introduction, "this is Agent Barnes, the Assistant Special Agent in charge of this case." The reverend reached out and offered his hand. "And this," Field added, "is Agent Horne, his assistant. Please describe for them what you've just told me."

Handshakes completed, the men took their seats and Reverend Keller, remarkably calm, started in. "I run a soup kitchen on Stewart. One of my parishioners came to me, asking for help. To make a long story short, in exchange for your help, I'm prepared to tell you where the body of your fallen agent is."

Barnes stared over at Horne. The case was suddenly taking a turn for the better. "Who is this parishioner of yours?"

Keller smiled. "Shame on you for asking. But, if possible, I would like to speak to the man you arrested yesterday afternoon for kidnapping. That

was quite the news report, you know.”

Barnes smirked. “That is, if you believe the agency’s run by a bunch of bumbling idiots,” he replied, the sarcasm ringing like a church bell.

“You have to admit, chasing a transmitter down a sewer pipe *is* a little funny. And tipping off the neighbor—well, that’s even more weird.”

“Mitchell Wilson’s going to get himself killed.

Keller’s mood turned pensive. “He goes by the name ‘Lightning.’ He’s kind of a Robin Hood figure among my patrons. The boy’s been shutting down illegal activities in my neighborhood one after another.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“No, but I think he plans on making an appearance today. Be gentle with him; he’s a good man. Make sure you have an adequate number of agents in front of Three Queens by nine this morning. Keep a close watch on Mr. Domenico—he won’t be a happy man. . . . Now, about Mr. Hart.” The reverend stood. “Why don’t you let me speak with him and we’ll finish this conversation later.”

Mitch exited the freeway at Washington and pulled into the coin-operated carwash next to the Texaco station. After dumping five dollars in change and making a handful of passes around the Ferrari—using both the brush and spray wand—the black ash was rinsed off and a new coat of hot wax had been applied. Then, walking over to the service station’s phone booth, he dropped a quarter and a dime into its slot and punched in a number, one he knew by heart. It was the number he’d seen flashing on Mike’s cell phone the week before. It was the number to an incoming call from Vinnie, as he stood in front of Carson’s Auto Body. “*Shame on you, kid,*” he’d heckled. “*Didn’t you think about your gorgeous woman first? Hope you get to her before Frankie does. . . .*” The threat had burned into Mitch’s soul. He remembered peering down the street and seeing Vinnie smiling at him over the hood of one of the police cars. “*Looks like I gotta go. Call me if you need any help with the details. You got his phone now.*”

It was Mitch’s turn now. Many times he’d rehearsed his role in this final act, right down to the last detail. The running was over. To use another fitting analogy, it was time to pay the conductor for his long and terrifying ride.

Meanwhile, Vinnie paced back and forth in front of his desk, making

another in a persistent string of impossible demands on his attorney. When the phone rang, his hand flew to the pocket of his jacket. “What?” he shouted into the phone.

Mitch initiated the freewheeling chat by taking a dig at his foe’s warped sense of decorum. “*Mr. Domenico* . . . Or should I call you Vinnie?”

An earful of malicious oaths and threats—sprinkled with a glut of choice profanities—sprayed through the phone.

When the earpiece had cooled down, Mitch taunted, “No need to be hostile. You’re the one who lied—again.”

“You’re a dead man, kid. If it’s the last thing I do, I’ll . . .”

“Vinnie, Vinnie, listen to me,” Mitch said, putting a bridle on the crass carousel of words. “I picked up my goat this morning and thought it only fair to deliver your car. I just gave it a bath and a coat of hot wax. I was wondering if maybe we could kiss and make up, sort of start off fresh, if you know what I mean.”

The line went silent. For perhaps the first time in his life, Vinnie was speechless. “I think you’ve seen I’m good at what I do,” Mitch continued. “You could use a guy like me to help get the place up and running again. And, who knows, I might be able to rig your tables for you to make a better profit.”

Vinnie’s brain spun like a merry-go-round. A dim hope of redemption dawned. He stammered for words.

“Of course I wouldn’t settle for anything less than half the business,” Mitch added. “I’ll give you a few minutes to think about it. I’m just around the corner. I’ll meet you under the canopy in five minutes.” Slamming down the receiver, he jumped back in the truck.

Two blocks from Three Queens Mitch eased the flatbed wrecker over to the side of the road. He removed the safety chains from the Ferrari’s chassis and tossed them on the floorboards of the old truck. Then, pulling his rumpled baseball cap low on his forehead and checking his watch, he fired up the wrecker one last time.

Still towing the gleaming, fire-red vehicle behind, he inched the tow truck the remaining few blocks up the street. For the second time in a week, Mitch felt as if he were floating through space. He’d experienced a similar feeling shortly after seeing Mike murdered—a stilted, surreal nauseating sensation. But now the sense of buoyancy was more a butterflies-in-the-stomach, weightless, thrilling, tired resignation. A climactic, fateful ending; the dawning of a new beginning.

He drove on. Outside the casino a dozen agents hunkered near their cars. Making a wide arc in front of the canopy, Mitch jammed the truck in reverse and backed under the canopy. With the agents gazing on, Vinnie pushed aside the glass door to claim his beloved prize. But Mitch wanted the presentation done right. With a flick of the wrist, he yanked the handle to the power take off and set the parking brake with his foot. By now two agents had come forward, their weapons drawn. Cautiously, they opened his door and called him down out of the truck's cab. Mitch climbed out, his hands in the air, having finally come to the end of his chain of daring—some would say reckless—exploits. Immediately he was forced to the ground. The blur of arms and blue jackets fogged his eyes; all he could hear were a series of screams, shouts, and the sound of metal sliding from the bed of the wrecker.

The truck's mechanism had been set in motion. Once the back lift had done its hydraulic magic, the bed of the tow truck continued to rise slowly into the air, a rise leading to a fall that Vinnie was helpless to prevent. The shouts died down, the metallic grinding abruptly ended, and a torrent of vulgarities rent the air. With the truck's bed up, it's load disengaged and slammed onto the concrete drive. Well tagged by the jaw marks of a junkyard crusher, the car lay flat on the ground, a scant ten inches tall, a crushed beer can at Vinnie's feet. It took five agents and one over-paid attorney to restrain Vinnie. He fumbled for his gun—but it was over.

When the ruckus had quelled to a relatively mild squawking of radios, milling FBI agents and curious onlookers, Mitch was brought to his feet. He peered across the slanted bed of the wrecker. Vinnie was there, stripped of his gun and disrobed of his pride. Mitch couldn't help but smile.

Notwithstanding his attorney's warnings to remain silent, the disabled tyrant screamed out, "This ain't over, punk! Not by a long shot!"

FORTY-FOUR

THE LUSH TERRY-CLOTH gently caressed her weathered skin. Nurse drew the towel from her face and polished the fog from the mirror. The corrugated reflection that peered back at her documented the passing of many years living under the harshest of conditions. The towel in her hand felt good against her skin. A shower in the morning, clean linen . . . they were comforts she could quickly become accustomed to. She crowded the indulgent thought from her mind and let the damp fabric slip from her fingers and sag onto the sparkling tile floor.

Sound, too, seemed more than a bit sullen as he carefully applied the layers of makeup to her face. His mind was far from the task of hiding the myriad creases and age spots. The money in Cap'n's briefcase called out to him. Its stockpile represented all the good things in life: a respectable job, a nice apartment, food in the refrigerator, silk sheets. Nurse studied the concentrated look on his flaxen face and listened to his labored breathing.

"You seem tired, Sound," Nurse said, the words cutting into the ponderous silence.

The skinny man looked up and forced a weak smile. "I guess all this excitement is just wearing me out."

"I know it ain't been easy, you livin' on th' street an' all."

"No, it hasn't. But you sure made it wonderful." His breathing was shallow and uneven. He was well aware that the life was slowly ebbing from his worn-out body. His malfunctioning immune system was failing faster than ever. The disease had nearly exacted its awful toll.

"Can't say I care much fer this spoiled livin' myself. If'n ya' ask me, could make a person fat."

Sound coughed and doubled over in pain. "I've bruised my ribs a little," he moaned.

An alarm went off in Nurse's head. "Lemme see."

"No, I'll be fine."

"I mean it," she insisted, reaching out with her crooked fingers.

Sound tried to resist the firm grip Nurse held on his shirt. "Really, I'll be fine."

Not to be denied, she yanked his shirttail free and lifted it up, exposing a nasty yellow bruise, which ran down his chest and across his stomach. "'At don't look so little t' me."

Sound pulled away. "I'll be fine."

"Any trouble inside? Pain in th' lungs?"

"Just a little congestion. No problem."

They both knew 'a little congestion,' if left untreated, could develop into full-blown pneumonia, imminent death for an uninsured man with AIDS. "Don't like it," fretted Nurse. "We best get you to the clinic."

"When we're finished. . . . Now, we need to get *you* looking like a million bucks, Mrs Lambert."

Cap'n stepped from the bathroom, little bits of tissue speckling his shiny head. "I remember why I stopped shavin'," he carped. "Can't stand the thought of bleedin' ever' day by my own hand."

The dismal tone of the room reached out like a woman scorned and slapped Cap'n up the side his newly shaved face. "What's goin' on?" he asked. "Had a death in the house?"

"No, everything's fine," replied Sound.

"Like hell it is. I seen faces same as those you're wearin' when Jumper was found on the tracks."

"We're just a little tired, is all." Sound knew the source of his bruised ribs. He also knew that it would tear Cap'n up something awful if he ever found out that he was the partial cause of the pain.

Tired of waiting—that's what Ritter was feeling. The 'few minutes' Barnes had promised had turned into hours—two, to be exact. Ritter had passed the time napping on the table, making a trip to the loo, and applying a new bandage wrap to his severed pinky. The guards were much more amenable to his requests than the last time he'd visited their fine establishment. And he was one who very much liked to be pampered.

Down the hall in a lockup section of the building, Greg Hart and Reverend Keller were finishing up a lengthy discussion that ran the gamut of marital relations—all about love, respect, responsibility, trust, overcoming addictions, and how to move forward if Linda were willing to reconsider a relationship. Greg had wholeheartedly agreed to any terms she might dictate.

Before the reverend left, he told Greg about one of his lawyer friends

who on occasion did a bit of pro-bono legal work for his parishioners. Keller promised to speak with him to see if he could fit another case on his docket. Then he stood and said, "My guess is Lightning's been brought in by the police by now. I'd have given a day's blessings to have seen Vinnie's face when his car was delivered," he added, clearly amused. "That expensive piece of flattened wreckage must have been quite a sad sight."

Greg chuckled, thinking of Mitch. "You don't suppose they hurt him do you?"

"I'm sure they treated him gently, and also sure that more than a little adrenalin was pumping through his veins. Payback usually isn't a good thing; in this case, I'll bet it felt mighty fine."

"Have you heard from Nurse?"

"Not yet, but my wager is she'll be right on time."

"And the elder Mr. Domenico?"

"I had a bit of a time getting through, but once I did and read him the letter, he was anxious to meet with me."

Greg extended his visitor a warm handshake. "I don't know how to thank you," he said.

"The expression on your face says it all. Just hope I don't get sent to join you here, that's all I ask."

"You don't suppose they'd . . ."

"Nah, I'm a man of the cloth," Keller retorted. "I have just a little more wiggle room than the regular Joe. Although I am going to pay through the nose listening to Cook. He can't stand serving warm orange juice on the soup line. But that refrigerator-freezer was needed elsewhere."

Greg laughed.

"It's time for a new one anyway." Reverend Keller continued to grip Greg's hand. He then pulled him close and said, "With God's help—and that's the source of all help, I remind you—we'll get you through this. I promise. And the rest of our friends, too."

Rays of warmth and compassion seemed to radiate from the old plumber like bright beams of channeled love. At that very moment Greg felt strangely connected to God. Little shards of prickly warmth danced up and down his spine. "Somehow I believe you," Greg said as they pulled away and wiped the corners of their eyes. "I can't help but believe you."

When the door clicked shut behind him, Reverend Keller bowed his head and leaned up against the nearest wall. Closing his eyes in prayer, he offered up thanks for bringing light to Greg's life. Then he put in a short-order for another little strand of future miracles.

On the other side of the wall from Keller, Greg, too, was overcome by a feeling of thanksgiving. A spiritual wave washed over him, a longing to be fed by God's grace. While waiting for the guard to come to escort him back to his cell, he covered his face with his hands and offered up his own humble prayer. For the first time in more than a year, he asked for—more accurately, *pled* for—additional guidance, direct from its Source.

Stephanie had been riveted by the latest news reports. Every few minutes an in-studio anchor would come on with an update: *It appears that a blatant onslaught of identity theft has been perpetrated against a number of local political leaders. . . . A Nevada State Senator has been accused of. . . . The mayor claims that credit cards in his name were used. . . .* The story had fast turned into a media feeding frenzy—and a politician's worst nightmare. Law enforcement and political leaders dogged one another, each pointing fingers, demanding the other do something—"create tougher laws," "find better means of enforcing them. . . ."

The disastrous assaults against politicians had been sustained on a local level, but the political fallout was very much felt nationwide. Lawmakers all across the country flew into a tizzy, desperately seeking a solution to the insidious attacks on their character. It was like they were standing in a wind-storm dressed in cheap cotton skirts. If nearly every public figure in Nevada could be targeted, that meant no one was safe.

In only a day's time, a congressional subcommittee was formed to investigate the issues and present new information that could help mend the broken system. In addition, a senate hearing had been scheduled to listen to victims of such crimes. The burden that followed such a devastating breach of personal financial security must be shared and felt by others.

One seemingly insignificant little man, Roy Higgins, appeared to be at the center of the storm. Although he was only the tiny cadre of the plan, it was he, who the media seemed to focus on. He who'd managed to kick the financial legs right out from under so many powerful men. Now he was being held in a Florida county jail, surrounded by a team of media-chasing legal-beagles. The public outcry for the case to move forward through the

justice system was being jammed up by a simple extradition hearing, a political hot-rock that quickly forced the Florida Supreme Court to call a special session to consider the evidence.

A long list of powerful people—senators, congressmen, judges, the state governor, and Las Vegas’s own mayor—were among the wounded egos. Juggling high-priced attorneys, they wanted to see the case back under Nevada rule as soon as possible. Only close at home could they assure that the proper thumbscrews would be applied.

It didn’t matter that the publicity and political wrangling were costing precious time—time that allowed Ivan Lions and his three-man staff to pull up stakes and skip the state; time that allowed Roy Higgins to melt under the clutches of slick lawyers and plead the 5th. Were it not for their shrewd motions and objections, Higgins would have sung like an angelic creep, giving up the entire basement operation and all its players.

Stephanie gazed impassively at her father’s face as it flashed across the screen on the national morning news, the pained face of a congressional freshman encompassed about by reporters. “He looks tired,” she said. “So does mother.”

“Public scrutiny isn’t an easy thing to take,” Maggie empathized.

Then Stephanie’s fixed stare took on a hurt expression as an all-too-vivid memory came to mind. “Once, during one of our worst arguments, he told me that raising a rebellious daughter who was an embarrassment to the family name was the hardest thing he’d ever done.”

“That must have stung.”

“It did, but I don’t think he really meant it. He’s just too bullheaded to say he’s sorry, and I’m too hurt to go crawling back for more.”

The women listened halfheartedly to the succession of news broadcasts. They were followed by an informal statement from Congressman MacArthur, which instantly turned into an impromptu question-and-answer session. Out of the blue, one of the reporters shouted out a question that sent a hush over the crowd. “Congressman MacArthur, is it true your daughter is being held in custody and your son-in-law, Mitchell Wilson, was arrested this morning on suspicion of murdering an FBI agent?”

“Oh, no!” Stephanie gasped.

The congressman’s face fell slack, the jolt from the question penetrating like a hot syringe. His head snapped to the side, as if he had a crick in his neck. Only slightly recovering from the shock, and with his political prowess barely intact, he mumbled, “I can’t comment at this

time.”

With that, he was beset by a fresh onslaught of questions. Stephanie watched the horror register on her mother’s face as she was shuffled to the waiting car. Deep within her eyes, the terrible—and understandable—wave of despair and disbelief merged with another, strange, indefinable emotion. Peering hard at the face on the screen, Stephanie suddenly recognized it for what it was. She beheld in her mother’s expression a note of relief and tranquility. Perhaps it resonated from the knowledge that now, finally, they could get to the bottom of the matter—and then start anew to climb back out.

The call to Mr. Lyman Wilding, the Special Supervisory Resident Agent (SSRA) up on the fifth floor, came within 20 minutes after Congressman MacArthur’s slam of Bureau headquarters in Washington. In less than two minutes, the stuff hit the fan on down the line: Field, the SAC, was censured by the SSRA and, in turn, Field yanked Barnes from a meeting with Reverend Keller and ordered him to report.

The ‘pucker factor’ was up around a ‘10’ when Barnes and Horne entered Field’s office, where Wilding himself sat, waiting.

“We’ve got a leak big enough to sink the whole damn ship,” Field began. “We just had a Washington reporter, on national television, ask Congressman MacArthur about his daughter and son-in-law. What the hell’s going on?”

“I don’t know, sir.” Barnes’ voice cracked slightly.

Wilding cleared his throat. A methodical man, with a full head of black hair graying at the temples, he sniffled a bit from the tail-end of a spring cold and begged a simple question: “Why wasn’t the congressman informed?”

Barnes came back with a simple answer: “The girl asked us not to tell him. The man hates his son-in-law as it is. Seems her marriage to the lower class drove a few skeletons into the closet and let a few others out.”

“Fair enough,” nodded Wilding. “The girl has her right to privacy. Now bring me up to speed. If I’m going to take a butt-chewing from Washington, I might as well know how to cover my agents’ backs.”

Barnes tried to summarize the situation in as few words as possible. “At this very minute we have a Reverend Keller sitting in interview two. He says he knows where Agent Hale’s body was hidden shortly after

he was murdered. From what we know about the reverend, he's straight up and tight with the homeless. The man has a lot of information rattling around he'll never give away, but what he's willing to give us seems legit."

"You mind if I observe the interview?"

"No, sir."

Hence, a few minutes later the brass were seated behind the two-way mirror as Barnes tried to pick up the interview where he left off. "Sorry for the interruption, Reverend. Let's see, where were we?"

Keller shook his head in mock forgetfulness. "I can't remember for sure. Was it you who told me about the report on national television, or was that inspiration?" Barnes flinched. The stunning fact was that the 'leak' was sitting right in front of him. He'd only barely recovered from the question when Wilding and Field entered the room—the proverbial cavalry to the rescue. "Reverend Keller," Wilding said, pulling his identification from his hip, "I'm the supervising agent of the Las Vegas division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation." He thrust the badge in Keller's face. "And this is Special Agent Field, in charge of this case." Field likewise flashed his badge. "You're a very resourceful man."

"With a little help from God, don't forget," the reverend said, smiling.

Wilding had no witty rebuttal for such a remark. "Granted. . . . Now," he stammered, "you might be able to clear up a lot of . . . *confusion* for us."

"I do that each morning on bended knee when I'm reminded of the needs of my little flock."

"Put aside the ecclesiastical mantle, Reverend," snapped Wilding, "It seems you may have an agenda that runs counter to what we're trying to achieve. Can we cut to the chase and put that request and consideration on the table?"

It was time for Keller to drop his bombshell. "Before we do," he said, meeting Wilding's gaze, "why don't you send a team to Ford Frozen Foods and examine locker number 418. I placed a call to Mr. Ford this morning; I don't believe you'll need a warrant."

"You'll wait here?"

"Fine. I was thinking it might be nice to visit another one of my parishioners—who just happens to be one of your prisoners—if you don't mind."

Nurse and Sound parked themselves in the dining room of The Palace, piecing on the brunch buffet. More breakfast varieties "than you can

shake a stick at”—as Nurse remarked—lined the linen-topped tables. Cap’n was off by himself, feasting at the snack bar. Occasionally he peeked over to see what was taking the two so long. Guests who sat nearby kept sneaking sideways glances at the odd-looking couple casually eating breakfast and engaged in a serious discussion.

“I don’t want any special measures taken to keep me alive. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yup,” Nurse grunted, “but it don’t mean I like it.”

Sound coughed. “You still have power of attorney for me, right?”

“That cough don’t sound so good.”

“Do you still have it?” Sound repeated.

“In my box. . . . Ya’ know, I don’t care none t’ talk ‘bout you dyin’.”

“Talking about it or not talking about . . . it won’t change anything.”

Nurse gave a nod. “Then let’s *not* talk about it.”

“We have to. I had that dream again last night. This time I was standing at the door, ready to knock. I think it’s going to happen soon. They say once it gets into its last stages, you go downhill pretty fast.”

Nurse inserted her fingertips in her ears and began to hum: “La, la, la.”

“Nurse,” Sound said, pleadingly, tapping on her hands. “You’re the closest thing to family I’ve got. I need you to listen.”

The old woman picked up her napkin and daubed at her eyes. “Don’t know if’n I can, boy. I ain’t had to deal with nobody dyin’—nobody I been close to, that is—not fer fifty years. . . .” Her voice broke as she added, “Ya’ got so . . . close t’ m’ heart. Don’t wanna . . . let ya’ go.”

Sound was crying, too. “Maybe you’re healing,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s time to let a little of the love back in . . . start receiving back some of that love you’ve been giving all these years. I haven’t heard you talk to Belle in days. And you just admitted that she died fifty years ago.”

“I was afraid,” Nurse blubbered. “Afraid if’n I let her die, she’d—she’d take my heart with her. Turned out just the opposite. Seem’s my heart’s so full it’s ‘bout t’ explode.”

“And that’s okay, Nurse. That’s how it’s supposed to feel when we lose someone we love.”

“But I don’t like it—don’t like it one bit. . . . Hurts too much.”

Sound forced a little smile. “Tell me about Belle. Was she a pretty baby?”

Amid the tears, a faint smile slowly appeared on Nurse’s lips. “Oh,” she sighed, “a beautiful child. Soft blue eyes, dimpled cheeks. When she giggled

she'd let out a belly-laugh 'at made ever'body in earshot howl. Her little hands looked like they'd been screwed on at th' wrist by God hisself. She used t' stand on my lap when she finished nursin' an' plant a mouthful a' kisses on my face. Would make me laugh so hard. . . . Her daddy tried t' make me stop nursin' her when she got so big she'd march right up an' pull up my shirt an' just 'bout crawl underneath it. Belle an' me, we did it anyways. Doctor said nursin' was good for th' baby." The old woman paused.

It was then that Sound realized how the dear old woman had picked up her nickname. She'd nursed 'til she could give no more, then went right on nursing those in need. It was a bonding thing. In her loneliness, she'd tried to fill a void—filling it up with love. "How are you feeling right now?" Sound asked.

Still picturing her beloved child, Nurse's smile hadn't faded one whit. "Them's fine memories," she said, her eyes still brimming with tears. "Makes me feel good all over."

Sound put his hand on hers. "That's how love works," he tenderly explained. "It never goes away. God gave us some tools to deal with pain. Time helps; so does the comfort of loved ones. And after awhile the pain goes away and pure love takes its place."

"It's gonna leave a big hole when you're gone."

"We've shared enough love to fill the hole—and then some. We've given each other so much that you'll have plenty to share. You'll be happier each time to give a little. . . ." Sound looked across the table and gave Nurse a solemn stare. His voice lowered nearly an octave. "Now Cap'n can't know he bruised my ribs clear to my lungs, or it'll crush him. Promise you'll never tell him. And if he ever does figure it out, promise me that you'll help him get through it."

Nurse squinted through the tears and mumbled, "Promise."

Sound returned to his philosophical lecture. "It's sometimes good to cry, Nurse. Tears are God's way of washing away the pain. When the tears come, call up the good times we've had, the hard times, too. Smile and laugh about them. I promise the hurt will go away if you do." He clasped the woman's weathered hands between his own. "If I could have a choice where I wanted to spend this last year, it'd be with you again. I'd take the sickness over health, to be your friend all over again."

Nurse let out a heavy sigh, a cleansing breath to oust the despair and take in the comfort. "An' if'n I could choose, I'd take th' sickness for ya', so's you could finish them years you'll miss."

The sound of air leaking out of something diverted their attention to a booth across the isle and down from theirs. It was Cap'n. "Psssst . . . pssst," he hissed, motioning with his head for them to leave the restaurant. If the sight of the two blubbering diners in the first booth hadn't already attracted enough attention, Cap'n's flat tire impression in booth number nine finished the job.

Smitty traversed the length and breadth of the junkyard, exploring every nook and cranny, climbing on mountains of cars, jumping from pile to pile. The dogs followed at his heels, running along on the ground, seemingly overjoyed to act as his personal entourage. "Tarzan of the Junkyard" seemed an appropriate title—and that's just how he felt: like a giddy, wild, all-powerful ape-man.

As far as Smitty was concerned, he'd died and gone to dog heaven. Up until Nurse came along, the few mutts he was permitted to have as a child had been his only friends in the world. It was as a sensitive eight-year-old that his friends met a most tragic fate. When his stepmother realized that those dogs were Smitty's only reason to get up each day and put a smile on his face—despite her beatings and near-drownings—she promptly saw to it that they were destroyed, slaughtered right before his eyes. The trauma lasted for years; at times the ghastly images from that day still caused him to awaken in a sweat of panic. But now both Smitty and his new canine pals were safe. That evil woman couldn't hurt these dogs—never, not where she'd gone to. No . . . never.

Smitty peeked under the front steps of the trailer and wrested the key from its hook. After gorging himself on week-old junkyard dog stew, soon he was sound asleep on the living room couch, happily dreaming about dogs.

Meanwhile, the home aid assigned by Medicare had already been replaced by a special agent trained in nursing. Word had not yet filtered down that the perp was in custody and the agent could be reassigned. And so, riding along in the back of a van, the agent and his not-so-patient patient, Mr. Wilson, were on their way out to the dusty junkyard.

Around 1:15 that afternoon, the homehealth van pulled up the gravel drive. Another car followed fifteen seconds behind. The sight and ruckus of a wild pack of dogs leaping from the porch sent a wave of terror through the young driver—and sent him scurrying back to the safety of the van. But

to Grandpa's ears, the barks and howls were strains of joy—comforting, lyrical music to a tired old man's soul. "All bark, no bite," the cantankerous old fellow grunted from the makeshift bed. He turned to the unnerved aid. "Unbuckle me and help me up. I'll call 'em off."

The aid released the straps and helped his patient to a sitting position, from where he gave a labored whistle. The barks immediately went from throaty snarls to whiny yips and yelps. The dogs' body language changed as well, tails wagging, heads bobbing.

"You can get out now," Grandpa called up front. "They know I'm home."

"You kiddin' me?" said the young man behind the wheel. "Them dogs'll eat me for lunch!"

All at once the trailer's front door burst open and, like a flash of lightning, Smitty sprang out and bounded over the railing, before disappearing southward into the metal jungle. Thundering paws gave chase, as one heap of dog flesh clambered over the other, each trying to be first in line behind the leader of the pack. Off they went, their anxious barks splitting the still, hot air.

FORTY-FIVE

A FEW BANGED RIBS, a scraped elbow, a sprained wrist, and the total and exquisite feeling of victory were his trophies of battle. Mitch would soon forget the bumps and bruises—not much more than your average day on the football field. But he'd carry with him the rest of his life this divine feeling of gratitude. What a relief it would be to be cleared of a crime he didn't commit. And the look on Vinnie's face was an enormous bonus, given at no cost to Mitch and the dozens of agents who'd reveled in the moment. All said and done, more than a few stifled chuckles had been heard before Mitch was put in a car and whisked away, the proclaimed "masked Zorro" of the homeless.

"You're a lucky young man," Reverend Keller said after proper introductions had been made. "A hot shot like David of old, perhaps, but shielded from the wickedness of the modern Goliath by the grace of God."

"You think God saved me?"

"Do you think you did it on your own—discovered the whereabouts of Vinnie's new operation, got your car back, got Vinnie arrested?"

"Yeah, with a lot of help from Smitty."

"Well that's giving credit where credit's due. Smitty's a miracle in himself. Alive against all worldly odds, with a positive outlook on life, despite who knows what horrible abuse. . . . Have you ever seen his back?"

"No."

"Scars so thick he can't stand up straight. I'm sure the scars inside are just as bad. Those we'll probably not see until he stands at the judgment bar of God, when Christ takes them upon himself and the person who inflicted them burns in hell."

Mitch's countenance fell. "I didn't know . . ."

"The man's come through it all like a champ, though."

"I'd say."

"And just look at Nurse. Another miracle. Stripped her bony behind to save your hide; clubbed a guard to keep you safe; and gave up all she had

to see this whole thing through. All this from a woman who was labeled loonier than a fruitcake in her earlier days. Now that backwoods hillbilly, the supposed lunatic, has the political yuppies taking lessons from her.”

“What do you mean?”

Keller shot Mitch a teasing smile. “You’ll figure it out before it’s over. Suffice it to say, she’s playing a key role in solving this entire identity theft mess. And, believe me, we’ll need a few more miracles to get you all out in one piece.”

Mitch shifted apprehensively. Nurse had warned him that the reverend was a sharp cookie. She’d also said that he could look right into one’s heart and pick out what was missing; it was one of his gifts from God. She never knew herself how often he did the same with her.

The reverend continued with his sermon. “Did you ever stop to think that God can see so far into the future that he can bring two people together to accomplish His purposes—to get His work done? That’s exactly what He did with Nurse and Sound. God sent to Nurse the one man that could teach her how to cope with death, and Sound was given Nurse to help him through this difficult time in his life. That’s the whole purpose behind what we call a “godsend”. . . . In the same way He can see forward, God can look so far back into the past that He can anticipate our actions. He knows us personally, he knows what we need most. . . . Take a complicated problem like your father-in-law. Did you have the tools to fix the problem?”

Mitch shook his head. “I don’t think so. He only spoke to me once, and that was to warn me to stay away from his daughter. There was no way I was going to change his mind.” He wondered—how did Reverend Keller know anything about his father-in-law?

Keller went on with his analogy. “How is it that you can take on a gangster like Vincent Domenico, but you can’t make peace with your in-laws? The thought casts a different light on things, doesn’t it? The key is knowing that someone else has the tools to fix that problem. It’s like a huge tool chest chock-full of different wrenches and saws and hammers. Each tool is designed for a different task. You might be terrific with a hammer, but maybe you need someone who can wield a saw, instead. That’s where the Master Carpenter comes in. He’s familiar with all the tools; He knows which one to pick up at any given time; He knows just who to send along to help you with your problems. . . . I have a feeling that you may be seeing a change of heart in your father-in-law. To you it will be a miracle; to God it’s just what

He does.”

Mitch smiled to himself. The reverend had just pointed out his weaknesses, without pointing fingers. He knew a lot about human nature. But Keller was wrong about one thing: Congressman MacArthur, Stephanie’s ogre of a daddy, would be all the more incensed by the whole, embarrassing ordeal. There would be no generous outpouring of love and compassion, nor a willingness to welcome Mitch into the family. “I think you’re wrong, Reverend. Do you even know who he is?”

“It doesn’t matter if I know who he is. God knows. He knows perfectly what He’s doing. You’ll see.” Keller stood. “I’m sure Agent Barnes and his cronies want to talk to me now.”

A knock came at the door; it was Barnes. “We’re ready to discuss a few arrangements with you, Reverend.”

The pastor turned back. “Think about it, Mitch. See what’s missing in your life. Give up what’s troubling you—give those burdens to God. He’ll take them when you’re ready.”

Mitch pondered the philosophy behind it all. “What about Bino’s daughter?” he called out, the niggling questions rushing into his mind. “Where was God then?”

Reverend Keller was already out the door, following Barnes down the hall and up the elevator to Field’s office. As he took his seat, his mind bounced Mitch’s words to and fro. *Bino’s daughter*. . . .

Wilding began the interview anew. “This is our prosecuting attorney, Glade Cox,” he said, gesturing to a suited figure seated near the opposite wall. “It turns out a body *was* in the locker. It’s gone now.”

“Agent Hale’s?”

“Possibly. We don’t have DNA confirmation yet.”

“Blood type matches Hale’s?”

“Yes.”

Keller suppressed a sudden yawn, brought on by fatigue, not boredom. “Assume for a moment it is Agent Hale. You know by now you’ve had a credit card scam operating in your backyard?”

Wilding glanced over at Field, then back at Keller. “We do.”

“Do you know who’s behind it and where its operation is?”

“That’s classified.”

“Why, because some big-shot politicians got taken to the cleaners?”

“What do you know about that?”

"I know quite a bit. I know who did it and why."

"You already turned your facts over to the press once, why wouldn't you do it again?"

Reverend Keller smiled and looked around the room. "Gentlemen, for the price you pay two of your agents a year, I feed half the homeless in Vegas. I know more about this city than all your agents combined. If I wanted a bunch of reporters and journalists to know what I know, I'd give it to them." His tone, rather than being conceited, was more than a bit irritated.

"Isn't that a bit presumptuous?"

The reverend dropped his gaze. "Yes, I'm sorry. I get carried away occasionally and forget I'm just a servant."

"It's obvious you have connections, and information."

"With the help of God and my friends, I can give you Vincent Domenico and enough information to put him away for good."

"What do you want in return?"

"One simple thing: immunity for my parishioners."

"That's a tall ticket."

"It'll cover the murders of three people and save a young girl's life."

Wilding needed time to think. "Why don't you give us a few minutes to discuss it." Reverend Keller left the room and Barnes closed the door.

"We don't need him, sir," insisted Barnes. "We've already got all the information he's got."

Wilding wasn't so sure. "How close are we to cracking the case?"

"Trenton Ritter will give us Vincent Domenico and the murder weapon. We make his fifty-grand subject to our obtaining the weapon and body."

"Suppose he can't produce?"

"We take what we can get and string him up with the rest of them."

"What about the girl?"

Barnes fought to maintain an optimistic voice. "That's where it's tricky. We've already identified the two thugs from Jersey. They flew into town a couple of days ago. We're getting close."

"How close?"

"They ate breakfast at Denny's this morning."

"And the other murders?"

"The chemicals from Jimmy's bones match the solvent used in the body

shop. The girls at Kitty's swear that Clint was the father of the dead hooker's child. We'll bring him in right after we wrap up Vinnie."

"And what about the credit cards?"

"Kitty will sink that ship to get out from under it all. We just don't know where they moved the shop to yet."

"Is Domenico still here?"

"Nah, his attorney made bail as soon as it was set. He doesn't get his piece back, though. We're keeping it as possible evidence." Barnes hesitated. "I have to admit, sir, the look on his face when he saw his flattened car slide off the wrecker was worth a week's pay."

"We could arrange that," Field teased.

The men in the room all gave a knowing chuckle. Wilding continued, "You think Mitch Wilson murdered Hales?"

Barnes carefully considered the question before responding. "He was packing the body in the trunk of his car; he had Hales' gun and badge on him; it was documented on film that they'd had an argument. . . . Wilson may not be the killer, but he's dirty—I know it. We can't let him walk scot-free. If he'd just cooperate with us. . . ."

"Mr. Cox," Wilding said, turning to the prosecuting attorney—who up until that time had remained uncharacteristically quiet—"what do you think?"

"With a gun and a body, we can go for life," Cox began, speaking in legalese. "It all hinges on the evidence as a whole, of course. If Wilson's willing to cooperate, like Barnes is saying, we could reduce the sentence substantially—maybe to 15-to-20 years."

Wilding turned back to Barnes. "Proceed as usual. Keep me posted. Get a fax out to every casino in the city. Have them report any suspicious activity involving credit cards. We're going to take the heat from the congressman on this one."

"And the reverend?"

"Tell him we'll be back with him."

"Yes, sir."

On his way out of Barnes's office, Wilding nodded at Reverend Keller, who was standing by the drinking fountain, listening to an employee bare her soul. The woman bolted at the sight of the boss from the upper floor. "Stop by the kitchen sometime, Sister," the reverend called after her. "We can always use a helping hand." She nodded and backed away, disappearing around a cubical.

Barnes approached the reverend and politely informed him that, as much as they appreciated his offer, they were apt to decline. New information on the case was rolling in and they would be in touch if they needed any further help.

"Be careful," Keller said. "Vinnie's a wicked man. He'll do whatever he feels he needs to do to save himself and protect his honor."

"We can take care of Mr. Domenico," Barnes assured his God-fearing guest. "You take care of your flock."

"I will, you can bet on it."

"And Reverend, don't do anything illegal. We'd rather not have to arrest one of our city's fine advocates of the homeless."

The reverend stepped out into the harsh sunlight. The new hand he'd been dealt had no face cards in it; things weren't going as planned. He peered up at a passing cloud and whispered a quiet prayer. The sunshine warmed his tired face, renewing him. The corners of his mouth lifted as he bent his head and scurried to his van.

Feted with lasagna and creamed corn from the cafeteria, Ritter lay against the wall in interview one, fast asleep, the lifestyle of the rich and famous permeating his dreams. In the happy recesses of his mind he could picture himself back in Yorkshire, doing nothing but spotting trains with his kid brother.

"Well, Mr. Ritter," boomed Barnes as he entered the room. "Looks like we've got a deal."

Ritter awoke with a start, snorted, and sat up. "Spot on, mate. . . . You book me flight?"

"Got your ticket right here." The agent dropped an itinerary on the table. Stapled to it was an envelope containing a one-way ticket to London. "Red-eye flight to New York."

"Me mum'll be a happy one, she will."

"You've got to sign the docs."

"You ain't said nothin' 'bout any docs."

"Government red tape."

Ritter turned a wary eye. "You wire the funds?"

"They'll go out as soon as these are signed."

Ritter heaved himself up off the floor and held the papers up to his foggy eyes, trying to focus on the small print. "Need me glasses. . . ."

"Where are they?"

“Back in me flat. Don’t read much these days.”

“Agent Horne can give you a ride.”

“I’d like to have me friend look this over, too. . . .”

National flight 70, from Reagan airport in Washington to Las Vegas, had been delayed by the endless bag checks and lines of additional security. Finally, after a three-hour wait, during which two first-class businessmen had been bumped in favor of two other travelers, the 747 was off the ground. The additional 40-minute wait out on the tarmac had set all the passengers on edge; two were getting particularly testy. The quiet conversation between Congressman MacArthur and his wife Levina had at times become rather heated. A gaggle of other first-class passengers pretended not to listen—but often could not help but do otherwise.

“She probably didn’t want you to know because she knew how you’d react,” whispered Mrs. MacArthur, her slender features showing the years of submission to the powerful man.

“She’s embarrassed me again, Levina—this time on national television. I told you that boy would be no good. I’ll get the marriage annulled. . . .”

“You’ll do no such thing, Dalton.” She took a sip of her soda and took in several deep breaths, hoping to jettison the weight of the load from her mind.

“I beg your pardon!” He glanced around in embarrassment from the outburst and rested his hand on hers.

“You’ll do no such thing,” she repeated, this time more loudly. “Not if you want me smiling by your side. . . . I’ve had enough.”

“Shh, Levina, hold it down . . .”

“No, I won’t. This has gone on too long . . .”

“This discussion can wait until we land.” Dalton MacArthur kept his domineering hand clasped tightly over hers.

“No, it won’t wait. This is our daughter we’re talking about, not your career or a promotion or just another political gambit or another voting district. She’s my *child*—and yours. I haven’t seen her in three years. . . .” Levina pulled her hand away. “Let go of me; that hurts.” An open can of Diet Coke tumbled from the tray and fizzed out onto the floor, bringing a gracious flight attendant to the rescue. The congressman’s wife turned her gaze to the window, sobbing silently.

An awkward hush fell over the first-class compartment. The jetliner started into its final descent.

Nurse sweated it out under her cotton dress and rayon slip. After their meager breakfast, she and Sound had gone on to hit three casinos. Now on their fourth, something was definitely amiss. The Aladdin's teller was taking a few extra minutes to process her card. It was then Sound noticed her dentures were missing, forgotten in the drawer at The Palace.

"Why didn't ya' say somethin'?" Nurse cussed under her breath. "I ain't never worn no teeth 'fore. I ain't used t' 'em."

Sound coughed, then went on the defensive. "I'm more accustomed to seeing you without them than you are. I didn't even notice." He coughed again. Profuse droplets of sweat ran down his high forehead.

Nurse stopped her henpecking. "Ain't yer fault. I'm th' one shoved 'em in th' drawer. . . . You feelin' okay?"

"Just a little hot. I'll be fine."

"Don't look fine."

"I just need to sit down a few minutes." He ambled away from the teller window and hiked himself up onto a slot-machine stool.

Nurse watched as he swabbed his brow and neck with a napkin and stuffed it back in his pocket. Panic spread across her toothless scowl when security from the Aladdin approached and asked her for a second picture ID. . . .

In his office, Barnes took the call from the Aladdin Hotel and Casino. It turned out to be the most profitable interruption of the afternoon. The card was good, reported the casino's head of security, but the odd-looking couple taking the cash sure seemed nervous. An old woman without teeth together with a slim, fuzzy-headed, sickly-looking man fit the description being passed among two dozen agents in the briefing room.

"Get a photo off the casino's security camera," ordered Barnes, a bit of a flourish back in his commands. "We'll distribute it by fax as soon as it comes from the lab. The rest of you start scouring the Strip. They're using the credit cards of a rich woman from New York. The *real* Margaret Thurston just spent the morning at the hospital with her father."

Back at the Aladdin, the guard turned the eccentric old woman and her companion loose. It turned out she didn't have any additional ID, but her other credit cards—of which she had a purse-full—were all legit.

Though it started out as a clumsy attempt at reconciliation, it ended up a most poignant reunion. It was their first opportunity to really sit down and

talk in over fifty years. Throughout all that time they had been decent to each other, but the love had long-since been buried. When Eddie had called and asked her to come out, she really had to force herself into it. He'd seemed strained, or was it just that he was getting old?

For days now she'd faithfully come to the hospital, each morning, noon and night. It was the honorable thing to do. He was her father; she, his only child. But now that he was doing better, it was time to go home. She'd booked a flight back to New York for the next day.

"I've got to tell you why I called," Eddie said as Margaret propped a second pillow under his head. It was clear that his opening line had been carefully thought out. "I've been too hard on you over the years."

Margaret sat down and crossed her legs. "I don't suppose I've been easy to deal with."

A lump formed in the old man's throat. "The boy's bad blood isn't your fault."

"Thank you for noticing."

"He's been into drugs."

"Yes, I know . . . since age twelve."

"I thought I could change him." Eddie sat up a bit more, wincing from the pain.

Margaret's head shook involuntarily. "I couldn't change him, and half the therapists in New York couldn't. Did you think you were Superman or something?"

"You always gave him too much."

"Like you did me?"

"I made a mistake; spoiled you rotten. You were a long way from home. . . ."

"I would rather have *been* home. I didn't have anybody to confide in."

"I couldn't keep you here."

"I know, I know. I've heard it a thousand times. Family Services would have taken me away . . ."

"They *would* have."

The woman fought for the right words. "And—and maybe it would have been better for both of us. At least I would've known you loved me. The way you sent me away . . . it felt like you wanted to get rid of me. You couldn't stand the thought of keeping me around."

Eddie's eyes began to leak tears. "That's not true. . . . It broke my

heart to send you away. You were the only thing I still loved.”

Margaret softened. She, too, blinked, then turned away. “Then . . . why?”

He let out a raspy sigh. “I took a good look at the lifestyle I was living; I saw how rough it was on you. You were already using foul language at five. I couldn’t give you what you needed.”

“I needed *you*. I’d already lost my mother. I needed the only parent I ever knew, not some fancy boarding school teaching proper etiquette and fancy music classes and voice lessons and French and violin. I needed my *dad*.” Margaret began to tear up for real. “Yes, I got a good education, and for that I thank you. But what I really needed—and still need—is *you*. I wanted you to tuck me in at night and sing me your silly songs. I wanted to see you shuffle your feet like you did before a big fight and let me give you good-luck kisses. I wanted you to come back to the locker room and let me clean the blood off your face and—and tell me . . . you won . . . just for me.”

Tears flowed freely now, on both sides. They seeped down into Eddie’s curled moustache and dripped off his chin. They streaked the mascara on Margaret’s lashes and soaked into the fabric of her blouse. A few words came from under the sodden moustache. “I’m . . . sorry. I made a mistake.”

“You did—and it broke my heart. Over the years I learned to protect my own heart from you. I’ve always been one to guard my feelings.”

“How can you ever forgive me?”

Margaret began to sob even more fiercely. “I don’t know . . . if I can. A hundred therapists at a hundred bucks an hour . . . couldn’t help me.”

“I’m sorry, Margaret. I’m sorry. . . . I love you.”

Margaret stood and faced the window. Her hand was pressed up to her mouth and her body shook. “Come here, Margie. Come over here and let me hold my little girl.” The old man held out his arms, loose folds of skin sagging under his once powerful biceps.

“Say that again,” came the faint request.

“What?”

“Say it again.”

“Come . . . let me hold my little girl?”

Margaret turned slightly. “The part . . . before that.”

“Come here, Margie?”

“You haven’t called me Margie in fifty years.”

Eddie let out a muffled grunt, remembering the smell of floor wax in the principal's office. "The school told me not to. It wasn't proper."

"All those years . . . that's all I would have needed to have known you still loved me."

"Oh, dear me, how I loved you. In the first year or two after you were gone, most nights I cried myself to sleep."

"Becky told me. She said sometimes she could hear you out in the alley." Margaret slid the chair up closer to the bed and gently draped herself across the old man's chest, silently committing to memory the rhythmic beat of his weary heart, the feel of his skinny arms—and remembering the tender words he'd just spoken.

Eddie lay still, scarcely breathing, eyes closed, taking it all in, basking in the pain from the weight on his body. It was the good sort of pain, the healing type—sort of like a massage. Besides, he could take any degree of suffering, now that his daughter was back.

A half-hour later, when all the tears were shed and both hearts warmed, the old man held his daughter's hands in his own. "Now that I know how much you love me," he began, "I hope you still feel the same when I tell you why I called you here."

"What is it?"

Eddie gripped her hands a little tighter. "I'm going to testify against Clint."

"What's he done now?"

"The reason I fell down the shaft was because I was running for my life."

"Clint was going to *kill* you?"

"Now that I've had time to think about it, I don't think so. Since then, on one occasion, he actually protected me from getting hurt."

"What, then?"

"He's been running a credit card scam down in the gym's basement. The dirtbag he partnered up with, he was the one that was going to kill me."

Margaret's head gave a shake. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"You better bring your husband to town. Your son is going to need a good lawyer."

Her reply came with a sense of relief. "Maybe they can learn to get along after all. Clinton hasn't had a good battle in years. Fighting for his son might be precisely what they both need."

FORTY-SIX

THE ABANDONED BUILDING embodied the entire neighborhood: hard and empty, dismal and destitute. The crack heads barely flinched at the sight of the police car pulling up beside the broken chain-link gate. They'd seen it so many times before. The cops came, busted, then released. To the crack heads it didn't matter. No, all that mattered was the high they were on at the moment, a high that would have to keep them up until the next score. That was how it was on the street. Steal, buy, blow; steal, buy, blow. . . . Smack of glass, a joint, a needle, whatever was going around would have to do.

Ritter climbed from the car. "Best you wait here, mate," he said, looking back through the window at Horne. "They don't think much a' your kind in this neighborhood."

Horne beckoned to his passenger. "The ticket—you best leave it in the car 'til you come back."

The cocky Brit flicked the envelope onto the seat and lit out. Through the twisted gate he went, across the yard, stopping to speak with each junky in his path. "You seen Errol? . . . How 'bout you, ya' seen Errol?" The larger part of the wasted few were hardly aware someone was speaking to them. The rest merely shook their heads in either calloused contempt or detached indifference.

When Ritter jimmied open the back door of the old processing building, the stench nearly knocked him to his knees. Black clouds of flies swarmed around piles of human waste near the entrance. The druggies and street people called the tactic "cheap security," a guard against trespassers, cops and other unwanted visitors. But Ritter was no ordinary knucklehead. He knew what it was all about.

Tiptoeing past the repugnant room, he left what air escaped his lungs behind. By the time he'd climbed up to the second floor, the new air he breathed in was only slightly better than the first. "You seen Errol?" he asked twice more, before receiving an affirmative reply.

“In the head, smokin’ a pipe”—this from a young man of no more than 17, glassy-eyed and also on his way up the steps.

Ritter pushed open the bathroom door. There, sitting on a rusty folding chair and sucking the last high from a stubby pipe, was Errol. Though ten years Ritter’s junior and with facial features that matched right down the line, dark rings circled his vacant eyes. Ritter’s animated demeanor belied the squalor of the setting. “Errol, I scored real good!” he enthused.

The other man shifted his gaze away from his dim shadow on the wall. “Hey, Trent, long time. . . .”

“It’s been a bloomin’ week, Errol! Listen, mate.” Ritter grabbed him by the shoulders and shook. “I scored a double-header, a hot batch. Look, I even bought a new suit.”

“Ruddy fine threads, too.”

“Errol, you remember Reverend Keller?”

“Sure do,” he slurred in reply. “Runnin’ the lunch over on Stewart.”

“That’s ‘im. He has your share a’ me smack.”

“You’re me man!” Errol stuck his hand up to deliver a high-five.

Ritter complied rather ineptly. “Listen, Errol. You go see him ‘bout ten o’clock. Got that? He’s got a package for ya’.”

“‘Bout ten?”

“That’s right. Go see ‘im ‘bout ten, he’ll give you a smack a’ glass in a box.”

“Bloody thanks!” Errol yammered, holding his hand up for yet another slap.

“That’s what brothers are for.”

Safely back in the undercover FBI van, Ritter requested that Horne make one more stop—this one near the Rio bridge, where he dislodged his old passport from its hiding place under a railroad tie—before driving down Stewart to Keller’s soup kitchen. Stopping in front of the rather drab gym, Horne climbed from the car and followed Ritter down the driveway to the back door. Inside the kitchen stood Cook, nervously scanning a shelf lined with gallon jugs of orange juice—all unrefrigerated.

“Hi, Cook. Where’s the reverend?”

“He ain’t here. What do you want?”

“I just got’s t’ chat wit’ him.”

“Won’t be back for an hour.”

Ritter glanced back at Horne. Keeping his distance, he’d remained

out on the steps. "You mind?" he said, caustically. "I need a bit a privacy here." Horne backed off the steps and into the alley, where he could keep an eye on his mark through the window.

"Cook, I got a program set up back in England. It'll help me brother get off drugs—you know, clean up his lot."

Cook leered out at the agent glancing nervously at the fridge—a fridge filled with—well not orange-juice. "What'd you bring him here for?"

Ritter reached inside his jacket and took out an envelope. He held it out and tried to steer Cook's mind onto the important matter at hand. "Listen, mate, you got t' give this t' the reverend. He needs t' put me brother Errol on a plane. They'll pick him up in London and lock 'im down. They'll think he's me. . . . Now here's me passport and the agreement with the man. Make sure Reverend calls the program t' tell 'em me brother's on his way. As soon as I help nail Vinnie, then they'll pay. Please, Cook," he begged, "make sure he gets on the flight. It'll save his life."

"I'll tell him. You just get the cop outta here."

"I'm goin', mate. Just make sure Reverend Keller calls the program t' tell 'em when the plane gets in. The money will be wired soon."

Reverend Keller knocked on the faded turquoise door. The sleazy sounds of illicit lust exhaled from the cracks in the windows and doors and past the throbbing vibrations of the dripping swamp cooler. The pungent smells of alcohol, tobacco and drunkenness stung the fetid air.

After a considerable delay, a garbled voice called out, "It ain't locked!"

Keller eased the door open and peered into the murky trailer. Bino, his red and puffy eyes, didn't look up from the porno flick. The slender man fumbled to light a cigarette with one hand and took a swig from a bottle clenched in the other. Two empty bottles lay askew on the floor next to the recliner; the ash tray that normally rested on the other side of the chair had toppled over onto the carpet.

"I've been sent to find you, Bernalillo!" the reverend's voice thundered through the noxious room.

Bino squinted over at the man who'd barged into his home. Bright sunlight streamed into the room, past the dark dressed angel standing in the doorway. "Who the hell are you?"

"A friend."

Bino scoffed. "I don't need no friends."

"But I do."

“Go away.”

“I can’t. I need a gambler.” Keller walked over and turned off the lurid scenes flashing on the screen.

“Sorry. You’ve got the wrong man. I quit.”

“Like you quit drinking?”

“Go away, preacher. You can’t save me.”

“We’ll see.” With that, he seized the slender drunk by the belt and the back of the collar and catapulted him out the door. His broad shoulders and bulky forearms—acquired from years of cranking pipes—came in handy as he muscled Bino into the van. Then he returned to the squalid trailer to retrieve the all-important oxygen tank.

After a quick two-hour nap, three pots of coffee, a cold shower, a shave and a haircut—administered by the preacher’s wife—and a borrowed suit, the former gambler was once more presentable. Reverend Keller’s next stop was the drugstore, where he picked up a couple of boxes of nicotine patches. Returning home, he lined both of Bino’s arms with them to stop the unsteady smoke stack from blowing the deal.

“You’ve got an hour to get your act together,” the preacher said brusquely. “Your daughter’s life depends on you giving the performance of your career. And I hope you haven’t forgotten how to bluff.”

“It won’t work,” Bino kept mumbling. “I met the man once. Mr. Domenico—he’s a harder case than his nephew. The old boss will kill us both.”

“Not if you do your job right.”

Political feathers hit the fan of justice when Congressman MacArthur flew into the Federal Building—on one broken wing—and demanded to see the person in charge. For the next 20 minutes, while Wilding and his secretary rearranged his workload, the congressman nursed his wounded pride by pacing back and forth in the foyer. First, he’d suffered the bruised ego of publicly being accused of credit card fraud; now he felt personally embarrassed by the fact that his wife had refused to stand by him through his terrible ordeal. While he’d waited for their luggage at baggage claims, she had hailed a cab and promptly disappeared without saying a word.

MacArthur bluntly explained the reason for his visit—and was rebuffed just as bluntly. “I’m sorry, Congressman, your daughter’s not a minor and she has the right to privacy,” Wilding replied when he’d had just

about enough of the congressman's posturing. "When my agents did a background check and found out who she was, they asked if they should contact you. Frankly, I can see why she didn't want us to."

"You realize I can go over your head?"

"You already did that. That's why you're here."

"This is an outrage," he harangued, pummeling the desk with the palm of his hand.

Wilding sprang to his feet. "Sir, you've exceeded my level of tolerance. I suggest you change your methods and work on your manners with me *and* with your daughter—that is, if you want to have a relationship with her. In the meantime, I have work to do." He turned to see his guest to the door.

Defeated by his lesser opponent, the congressman mellowed. "I just want what's best for my daughter."

Wilding paused in the doorway. "I'm sure you do, sir."

"Will you give her a message?"

"And what would that be?"

"Her mother's heart is breaking. Will she at least consider seeing her?"

"I'll relay the message."

Four o'clock had come and gone before Sutton brought Stephanie into the Federal Building. Maggie was sent home with the promise that Vinnie was now under control. And with Mitch locked up, any further risk was minimal. Stephanie sized up the situation. The message from her father had been delivered via radio en route to the FBI offices. A tender-voiced woman dispatcher had relayed it, word-for-word, over the line. If the emotional roller coaster wasn't already at its peak, then the thought of speaking with her parents sent it still higher. And seeing Mitch again, that would send it skyrocketing out of control.

She was led to a small interview room on the second floor. It had no windows to the outside, only a tiny pane in the door. Thin fingers of wire embedded in the translucent glass zig-zagged at right angles to one another across the opening. Light filtering in from the hall cast oversized patterns of shadow and light on the floor. Several quiet moments, alone, left time for reflection. The tangle of events and information, claims and counter-claims kept returning to her brain. It all seemed too complicated.

As expected, when the door opened and Mitch stepped into the room,

the roller coaster started on its downward spiral. A split second elapsed while he assessed the damages he'd inflicted on her. Then he engulfed her in his arms. "It's almost over, Stef," he whispered, a strained smile stretched across his flushed cheeks.

The moment was both awkward and too abrupt, as Stephanie pulled away and dried her cheeks with her fingers. "I need to hear it from you, Mitch. Just tell it to me straight. Did you kill Mike? Did you do any of those terrible things they say you did?"

Mitch leaned back, still clinging to her shoulders, and stared into her deep, sad eyes. "Do you really need to ask?"

She surveyed his face, seeking any hint of deception. Maggie's words came to mind. *Could she see far enough inside him to know his heart? Or did she already know?* Digging still deeper, she could feel the answers to her questions come alive. They grew and flowered inside her, like the tiny seeds that had sprung from him to her several months earlier. A rush of tingles surged up and down her spine, then came to rest in her eyes—a soft, twinkling glow. She knew, at that very moment and in an intimate way she couldn't explain, Mitch's heart. "No," she said.

Stephanie raised her slender arms and pressed her palms against his cheeks and ears. Their lips met in a lingering kiss. . . .

"I missed you," Mitch finally said as he held his bride close. "I know we can get through all this because we have each other."

The half-hour of bliss flew by. The guard arrived and hauled Mitch away. But for Stephanie a union of hearts had taken place, one that any temporary isolation couldn't erase. Heartfelt apologies for withholding some of the truth were warmly accepted and no-holds-barred explanations had supplied the much-needed missing pieces to the puzzle. The guard reappeared to escort her out into the hall. She lagged behind, her way of postponing what was next on her agenda, and—in a more subliminal way—to continue to soak in the overpowering feeling of love which she'd just experienced.

Finally forcing herself from the room, she went to place the call. It wouldn't be easy. The face-to-face meeting later on would be even harder. Two coins from her purse clinked into the slot. A long, apprehensive sigh streamed from her heaving chest. A click came from the other end of the line. "Hello, Mother?"

The routine was the same in every restroom at every casino. Every few

hours Sound would casually walk into the bathroom and enter a predetermined stall. Cap'n was always there, sitting on an adjacent toilet, ready to transfer the semi-laundered cash. The current stop would be their last, Sound was informed by way of a piece of toilet tissue scribbled with black ink and flicked under the divider. The briefcase was full; it was time to make their get-away.

Cap'n rented a room on the 7th floor. After signaling Nurse with his fingers what number they were in, he shrewdly slipped her the key. In the elevator on their way up, Sound's coughing worsened. Intermittent spasms of coughs and wheezes brought silent glares from their fellow passengers. When the last guests exited the lift on the 5th floor, Nurse gave him a fretful stare. "Boy, it's time ya' take a rest."

"It's getting worse," he gasped. "I thought last time was bad. . . ." The veins in his hands bulging, he gripped the handrail in the corner of the compartment.

"You've endured lots a' sufferin'. Don't worry none, we can get ya' through this."

"You remember what you promised last time?"

Nurse stuck her nose in the air as if she were sniffing a bad smell. "Sorry, promises ain't valid when made under duress."

Sound brought his hand up, palm forward. "I don't want needles shoved in my lungs again."

"It bought a year."

"Yeah, the best year of my life, too." The wheezing intensified. "But this time . . . is different. This time I'm standing at the door. . . ."

When the elevator doors parted, Nurse's feet remained glued to the floor. She stared into the open hallway, loathing to leave the elevator. Sound stepped between the door and the wall and swivelled unsteadily on his heels, facing her. He leaned up against the door's rubber safety rail and said, "I've got to go through." Then he turned and hobbled down the hall.

The old woman shuffled after him, reached out and pulled his slender arm across her stooped shoulder. "It still ain't fair," she yapped.

"I knew the risks."

Nurse inserted the card in the key slot and pushed the door open, still mumbling, "Just ain't fair—ain't fair t' th' rest a' us . . ."

Staggering inside, Sound hunched over and crumpled onto the bed, coughing. In truth, it was barely a cough at all—more like a deep-seated

hacking, a feeble attempt to clear the fluid building up in his lungs. "The doctor said this would happen," he whispered. "If it started again . . . they'd fill up fast."

Nurse propped several pillows up against the headboard and helped Sound get comfortable. A knock came at the door. "'At'd be Cap'n," Nurse said as she scurried to answer it.

Cap'n lunged inside and quickly re-bolted the lock. He was breathing hard. "Got cops all over the foyer!"

Nurse shot him a worried glance. "Must a' found us."

"Only be a few minutes 'fore they figure out where we is."

"This here's a big hotel, Cap'n. At's why we chose her."

The big man plopped down and stared down at the pallid figure on the bed. "Bad, ain't it?"

Sound picked the remote up off the nightstand and pressed the top button. The hotel viewing menu came up on the television, along with a display of the time. "His plane ought to be landing any minute," he croaked.

"T' hell with the plane," Cap'n groused. "You's sick again, ain't ya'?"

His breathing labored and shallow, Sound coughed again, a puny puff of air that was almost silent. "You finish your . . . mission, Cap'n. . . . I'll be fine."

Cap'n dropped to his knees and half crawled across the floor. "Your lungs 'r fillin' up again, ain't they?"

Four slim fingers and a skeletal thumb came to rest on the big man's meaty hand, which sagged lifelessly on the bed. "We've had some good times . . . haven't we? . . ." Sound paused between breaths. "We've seen . . . some awesome battles, Cap'n."

"Ain't over," called out the ex-soldier, as if he could command health and spirit and vitality back into the gaunt body. "They ain't over. . . . Nurse, do somethin'." He peered over at his wise old friend, alligator tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Ya' want him t' be more comfortable, ya' can help him t' his feet," said Nurse. "Gets th' lungs cleared out."

Cap'n stood up and bent to gently lift the bony body up. Sound groaned with pain when Cap'n reached around his rib cage and brought him to his feet, face to face, supporting his weight on his thick chest. "You been hurt?" Cap'n demanded. "Somebody hurt you, Sound? I'll string 'em up by the yardarm!"

Sound slouched up against Cap'n, his arms sticking out at his side, a

veritable stick of a scarecrow. With his torso stretched, Sound breathed a bit easier. "I just banged my ribs a bit. . . ." The color slowly began to return to Sound's flaxen face. "That feels better, Cap'n. . . . Thank you."

Cap'n's slick head wrinkled in thought. "You two was talkin' 'bout it this mornin', wasn't you? Didn't want me to know. . . . Why?" A fragile hush fell over the room. A watery substance from Sound's nose and eyes had begun to trickle down, saturating both men's shirts.

Nurse clambered up onto the bed to wrap her arms around her 'boys,' her skinny arms pinning their heads to her breast. "Just didn't want ya' fussin', 's all,"

Cap'n looked up at Nurse, terror etched in his eyes. "You're lyin'. It was me that did it, wasn't it? When I gave him the elbow th' other day. I banged him up real good, didn't I?" Still propping up his best buddy, he broke down, sobbing uncontrollably. "I done killed you. . . ."

Sound patted his friend's back. "It's okay, Cap'n. It could have been anything. . . . Now you've got to stop shaking me, or put me back down."

Cap'n sucked in a bottomless breath and reined in the sobs, the tears still melting down his big, black face. Then this powerful man, whose arms had crushed the life right out of one man and rendered another helpless, stood stock-still, his vice-like arms lovingly encircled about a third man in the futile hope of adding hours to his life, even while his heart was breaking.

Barnes's juggling act was not going too well. Besides not being that popular of an attraction on the Vegas stage show circuit, juggling four balls at once was not his forte. That would be electronic surveillance. Anyway, now he was enmeshed in trying to run a manhunt, managing an undercover operation, keeping a continual watch on four or five different individuals, and seeking a way to release Stephanie from protective custody, all at the same time.

Meanwhile, the mother-to-be was contemplating how best to approach the upcoming visit from her own mother. Slumped in the waiting room, she wrestled with her latest decision. She would reach out to hug her mother . . . or maybe not. Perhaps the cold-shoulder treatment would be more effective. What she really wanted to do was greet her with a hard slap in the kisser. The rejection she felt three years before had been the hardest thing she'd ever had to deal with.

Her mind harkened back to the last time she saw her parents. Her father had been furious. She didn't want his money, his car, his home, his promi-

nence. She didn't want anything from him, except his love and blessing—which he refused to give. He'd stormed about the four-car garage as she loaded the last of her things in the little car, a gift from Mitch, one of pure love, no strings attached. That was when her father had jumped into his Mercedes and squealed off down the street. Before punching the gas, he'd rolled down his window and sneered, "Don't you come crawling back when things don't work out with your gigolo boyfriend."

The bitter words had cut deep. She'd looked to her mother, standing in the door leading to the kitchen, for support, to come to her rescue—if not directly, at least a token gesture of encouragement, some bit of comfort. But there was none. She had just stood there without the slightest evidence of sympathy or understanding, too afraid of her husband, too controlled by him.

Since that day, there had been no contact of any kind. No calls, no apologies, nothing to suggest they felt any differently. Her father, with all his power and notoriety, could have found them in a heartbeat. But he hadn't. He couldn't admit to being wrong. He couldn't stand the thought that she'd chosen to live without the wealth and comforts he could offer. Now, just like that, he'd sent a message. Was it a genuine attempt at reconciliation? Or was it to flaunt their emotional distance at her?

At the ring of the elevator bell Stephanie looked up, as she had done the previous ten times it had sounded. The doors parted and a very attractive, fashionably dressed woman stepped from the lift, alone. Red nails and matching red lipstick augmented her flawless white skin. Stephanie studied the anticipation and angst garnishing her mother's face as her eyes darted about the room. At last they locked onto her daughter, who struggled up from the armchair.

The reticence was but momentary. The older woman contemplated Stephanie's maternal state, then—any lingering apprehension evaporating into the cosmos—she dropped her handbag on the floor and rushed over to an embrace she'd been without far too long. Nearly a bucketful of tears followed before it occurred to the grandmother-to-be, wholly and inexorably, that she loved her daughter with a limitless, never-ending, unconditional love.

A plastic-coated transmitter the size of a dime had been stitched into Ritter's belt. Immune to any means of conventional bug detection, it was the FBI's way of tracking their key informant's movements.

Ritter-the-snitch received from Barnes his last-minute pep-talk. "We've pulled out the team monitoring Vinnie's activities," he was informed. "We'll be following you from a distance. If we're able to predict where you're headed, we'll put in place a team out front as well."

Ritter reiterated his intention to keep his ace firmly tucked up his sleeve. "Now don't go tryin' t' figure out all my secrets, mate. I ain't goin' t' tell ya' nothin' 'til my money's secure. If you knew everything I knew, you wouldn't bloody need me no more, would you? And then I wouldn't get paid the fifty-grand and live like a king in me homeland, would I?"

Barnes hustled his snitch toward the office door. "Where'd you put the plane ticket?"

"Left it in the Reverend's care t' make sure you keep your word. Don't want no double-cross in' goin' on now, do we? Wouldn't want the U.S. Federal Government takin' advantage a' no homeless redcoat."

"The contract says the body and the gun."

"I knows what the bloomin' contract says. You'll get 'em both—I guarantee it. You just keep your word. I'll be givin' ya' more than ya' ever dreamed 'fore the night's over. You just wait an' see."

"No funny business, Ritter," Barnes threatened.

"Course not. Ain't nothin' funny 'bout it, mate. Nothin' funny at all."

The papers properly signed and notarized, Ritter was released into the hands of Vinnie's attorney. Spread out over a three-block distance, the four-car team picked up the first of its signals from Ritter's belt.

FORTY-SEVEN

THE OFFICES OF NEW YORK, NEW YORK—the Las Vegas casino, that is—were abuzz. Its security team had upped the ante, intent on playing an even faster-paced, higher-stakes game of money and fun than usual. FBI agents had been posted at various exits and instructed to work in concert with regular security, all bent on putting a stop to the sophisticated yet blatant credit-card money-laundering scheme. Agents assigned to work in the offices replayed dozens upon dozens of security tapes, trying to identify the perpetrators. The game could end up being a long one, as a blanket search warrant covering the entire hotel was out of the question.

Head of security had explained that all the casino's cameras didn't run all the time. It would be an impossible task even to *handle* the thousands of tapes per day, much less *view* them all.

It was Horne—not the agent posted at the door—who noticed the two preachers making their way through the lobby. One was toting an oxygen bottle over his shoulder, his naked upper lip suffering from a singularly nervous twitch.

The agent quickly got on the horn and called Barnes. “Reverend Keller just walked in. And you won't believe who he's collared up to look like a preacher.”

Barnes's ears perked up. “Keller's in the casino?” Poor juggler that he was, he held a radio in each hand, trying his best to shuffle two operations going down at the same time.

“Affirmative—and Bino's at his side, looking like he just finished a sequel to the original Sermon on the Mount.”

“What the hell?” panted Barnes, itching to be on-site. “Maybe the good reverend isn't what he pretends to be. Keep back and see what's going on. And hold off on the bust of the old woman if you find her.”

Up on the 7th floor, that very old woman was eyeing the clock. “Time t' go, Cap'n,” she fussed.

Sound was asleep, still in his vertical position, breathing in quiet, wispy breaths. His head yet rested on Cap'n's broad shoulder, like that of a sleeping child. The strongman's arms felt heavy as lead. "Can't now. He just got t' sleep," he argued, slowly rocking back and forth.

"He wakes up and you ain't done your job, there'll be a price to pay," Nurse fumed. "Won't be much use savin' him if'n we don't finish the mission. None a' it 'll be worth a hill a' beans."

Cap'n disagreed. "Won't be a mission worth finishin' if we don't all make it out alive."

"We knew th' risks back when we decided t' take on Mr. Vinnie," countered Nurse.

"But the damage came from within the ranks."

"Was Desert Storm worth fightin'?" she grumped.

"Was," Cap'n nodded. "We kicked them Iraqi, oil-lovin' tails back where they came from."

"Friendlies ever take fire?" she asked.

"Did."

"So ya' think we should'a gived back Kuwait jus' 'cause a few friendlies took it in th' shorts?"

"Not over their oil-burnin' hides."

Nurse's comparison built top to bottom, she pointed at Sound. "Then you put him down an' come finish what we started; make th' losses worth his while."

Cap'n's arm's shook from fatigue as he lowered Sound down onto the mattress. Nurse positioned herself at the head of the bed to help hike his skinny frame up to lean against the headboard. A little moan came from his parched lips. He stirred, opened his eyes, and smiled. "Thank you, Laurence Elroy Jackson," he whispered, as an ice-cold hand pressed against Cap'n's flushed cheeks. "I feel much better. You've been a good friend. It's been a pleasure serving in the trenches with you. Now you dry your eyes and lift your chin." Sound brushed a tear from the fleshy, black cheek. "When I get through the door, I'll tell the Big Man upstairs you never meant to hurt anyone. I know you have a heart of gold. God knows it too."

"You hang in there 'til I get back," said Cap'n, stabbing at the air with his index finger.

"I'll be here with bells on my toes."

Nurse brought in a glass of water and set it on the nightstand.

“Thanks,” said Sound, patting her hand.

Cap’n shuffled stiffly from the bed into the bathroom. Cupping his hands under a flow of cold water, he drew it up to his face, head and neck. Over and over again he splashed himself with the cleansing liquid. When this prolonged baptism was completed, he took a towel from the rack and pressed it against his eyes. For a long time he stood like that, the soft terry-cloth blotting out his perceived sins. His penance fulfilled, he turned his attention back to his job. Before marching out the door, he poked his wide head back into the room and said, “Sound, you think of silk sheets and clean pajamas while I’m gone, got that?”

“I will, Cap’n. Don’t worry, I will.”

Striding confidently down the hall to the elevator, briefcase in hand, Cap’n descended to the main level bar and took a seat at a table—one over from where the preachers sat. A waitress came over and asked what she could get him. “Coffee,” was his curt reply.

Meanwhile, Bino’s cloudy mind fought to stay focused. Skittish—and on the verge of a nicotine fit—he stared down at his watch. A second waitress bustled over to the table and asked if she could refill his coffee. He nodded and budged the cup a few inches her way.

Just then Reverend Keller spied three men entering the bar. He tapped Bino’s foot with his shoe and gestured towards the door. “That him?”

Bino straightened up in his chair and casually looked around. Then he turned his poker-faced gaze on the trio. He reached up with his hand and wiped his mouth. “The one in the middle,” he replied.

Two goons, who looked more like musclebound apes, scanned the bar and branched off. One wandered over to the bar and took a seat where he could survey the entire room. The other’s fixed stare fell on Cap’n. Making his way over to the table, he settled into a vacant seat, facing the mahogany-skinned giant. Cap’n smiled. The man rested both elbows on the wood-grain top and got down to business.

Stationed in the kitchen, Horne sent out a distress signal. “Something doesn’t look right!” he called into his radio. “Three wise guys just walked in.”

Barnes’s worried voice blasted through his earpiece. “Who are they?”

“I’d say they’re Vinnie’s friends.”

“What do they look like?”

“The boss has a high, flat forehead, gray hair, combed back, slicked down. His skin is pock-marked—like he had a case of real bad acne as a

kid. He's going over to Keller and Bino's table."

"What color are his eyes?"

"Can't tell. It's too dark."

Out in the bar, both preachers stood to greet the main man. "Reverend Keller," he nodded, the trace of a native Italian accent intermingling with an acquired Jersey dialect.

Keller extended his hand. "Mr. Domenico." The man looked down. It was a breach of etiquette to extend a hand to a crime boss. Shunning the gesture, he slid out a chair and sat down. The reverend swung his hand sideways in Bino's direction. "This is my associate, Brother Bernalillo."

Domenico, barely acknowledging Bino's nod, waved at Keller to take his seat. "You can call me Antonio," he began. "I'm a great respecter of men of the cloth, but with what you're about to do, I figure you'll want to put your collars on the table and walk away. You catch my drift?"

Horne anxiously tapped the waitress who'd just entered the kitchen. "See that man sitting next to the two preachers? Go offer him some coffee. . . . And make sure you get a good look at his eyes."

The tired young woman, not taking kindly to the stranger's brusque orders, replied, "Sorry, mister, it's not my table."

Horne drew his badge and flashed it in front of her eyes. "Listen. I don't care. I need your help." The woman nodded, turned on her heels, and returned to the bar to pick up a pot of coffee.

At that very moment, Keller was at his persuasive best. "I think what I have to say will save you a lot of trouble. . . ."

When the waitress approached the table, the conversation ground to a halt. "Can I pour you some coffee?" she asked.

"Cappuccino," Antonio replied. The tete-a-tete remained on hold until after she'd moved on to pour the black vagrant masquerading as a hotshot gambler a hot cup of java. Turning back to Keller, Domenico parroted the reverend's words. "So you think you have information that will save me lots a' trouble, huh?"

"Have you heard the latest on the stolen identity story? Several of our distinguished politicians have been making the headlines."

"Yeah, the senate called a hearing. So?"

Reverend Keller paused. "Seems your nephew is the one responsible for that little headache."

"What Vinnie does with his free time is no concern of mine."

Out in the kitchen, Horne's reluctant waitress reported in. "All he wants is a cappuccino."

"What color are his eyes?"

"Blue."

Horne shooed her away. "Get him his cappuccino." Then he lifted his radio. "It's him."

Barnes pulled the agents in from the exits to form a tighter ring around the bar. Then from the other radio he listened in on the agents posted at Three Queens. "They're coming out. . . . It's just Vinnie and Ritter."

"Keep your distance. We don't want to spook them."

Vinnie was driving a new sports car, a sleek, navy blue Jaguar XKR with beige interior and trim. "Nice wheels," Ritter said, ogling the ride. "You and your lawyer have the same, fine taste."

"Yeah, I talked with him a minute ago," said Vinnie, a burr under his saddle. "He thought it was strange that it took so long to get you released this time."

Little beads of sweat had formed on Ritter's upper lip. He blurted out his canned excuse. "You know how it is, mate. They was tryin' t' get me back on their team. Didn't want t' let me out."

Vinnie eyed the Brit suspiciously and fired a second salvo. "An hour before you came back, the agents up and pulled away from the casino. It looked like they knew you was comin'. You tight with them or somethin'?"

"It's nothin', mate. I didn't budge." Ritter rubbed his damp palms on the thighs of his pants.

Vinnie reached across the console and grabbed Ritter by the pinkie. "You're lyin' to me . . ."

The Jaguar's airtight interior muffled the screams. "Okay, okay, I was goin' . . . t' tell ya'" he howled in anguish. "They put . . . this little thing in me belt, so's they could follow us."

Vinnie raised Ritter's hand and slammed the damaged pinky down onto the shifter. When Ritter's shrieks finally died to a sniveling whine, the mafioso directed him to take off his belt. "We'll see if you're tellin' the truth," he sneered. Racing under the freeway overpass, he tossed the belt out the window. Then, punching the gas pedal to the floor, he cut the wheel and squealed off down Stewart toward Eastern Avenue. In three minutes flat he'd pulled onto the Eastern on-ramp and sped back

up the freeway. Two hundred yards from the overpass he pulled over onto the shoulder and watched.

Sure enough, on the road below an unmarked van was inching its way toward the bugged belt, which lay at the foot of a chain link fence running along the base of the freeway's concrete skirt. "Which way are they headed?" Barnes called into his radio.

"Nowhere, sir. They're not moving."

"You have a visual?"

"No, sir. You said to stay back."

"Give them a minute or two, then move in and take a look."

"Yes, sir."

Barnes drew the other radio up to his lips. "Everyone in position?"

"Yes, sir," Horne replied.

"What are they doing?"

"Still talking."

Antonio's face registered little concern. "Credit card fraud, you say? And you have enough evidence to put him away for a few years? Big deal. Be good for him to do some time—might wipe that pompous grin off his mouth. The boy's never been arrested. Too smart for his own good."

Bino finally gathered the courage to ask a question of his own. His meek, hang-dog manner and soft, breathy utterances made him appear truly ministerial. "Did you know . . . Three Queens has been . . . shut down?"

"What do you mean shut down?" At last Keller could detect a little emotion in the crime boss's voice.

"Out of commission . . ." clarified Bino, "empty . . . no guests."

"So Vinnie finally got the permits. I been askin' what was takin' him so long."

Reverend Keller shook his head. "He could have had the permits months ago," he said. Removing a folded document from his pocket, he slid it across the table. "The application deadline expired only a few weeks ago. He could've pulled the permit anytime up to a year before that."

Antonio skimmed the document—which a day earlier Keller had sifted from Nurse's filing system. His visage hardened. "Maybe I put a little too much trust in the boy."

"It's worse," Keller continued. "He's been skimming off the top." He pushed several more documents in front of his attentive table-mate.

“This the kind of money you pay him?”

The scars that ran along the crime boss’s right jaw and disappeared below the ear, deepened. His steely gaze met Keller’s. “I take care of my own family problems. You stay out of this.”

Unnoticed by Domenico, under the table Bino was giving Keller the shin-bang treatment, clear signals to back off. Reverend Keller ignored the advice. “I can’t stay out of it. He’s hurt some of my friends. Any of your boys leave town the last few days?”

“How should I know? I got a big family.”

“A little girl’s been kidnapped. Another of Vinnie’s stunts.”

Antonio gestured to the man at the bar. The gorilla slid off his barstool and strode over to where the boss sat. After engaging in a brief and heated exchange—all in Italian—the goon returned to his stool and Domenico, as was his custom, recapped to that point their conversation. “Okay, so two of Vinnie’s old pals came to town and . . .”

At the next table over, Cap’n sipped his last thimbleful of coffee, picked up the briefcase, and exited the bar. Finding a phone, he called up to the room on the 7th floor. “It’s time,” is all he said. Then, wandering the casino, he began counting the agents trying to blend in with the guests—a little game to take his mind off the stress he was under. The G-men weren’t that hard to pick out. They didn’t pay much attention to his movements, rather, remained focused on what was transpiring out in the bar.

By this time, Domenico had heard about all he needed to hear. But Keller stayed on the offensive. “It’s never been your family’s MO to steal children,” he said. “In fact, it’s a bit cowardly, isn’t it?” The toe of Bino’s shoe was going nuts under the table, emphatically kicking the reverend’s heel.

In the kitchen, Horne called on the radio. “They’re still talking, sir.”

“About what?” Barnes asked.

“I don’t know. We’re almost ready to send in Sutton.” Agent Sutton, dressed in a skimpy waitress outfit, nervously balanced the cappuccino in her hand. A small listening device was taped to the bottom of the plate. “Go get ‘em,” Horne said with the enthusiasm of a little-league coach.

“Shut up, Horne.” Sutton waltzed from the kitchen and sidled up to the table. “Here you go, sir.” Chomping on her gum for all it was worth, she set the cup down in front of Mr. Domenico. “What else can I get you gentlemen?”

Antonio shot a glance around the room. All the other waitresses had

mysteriously disappeared. Sutton breezed over to a nearby table and began wiping it down. The wise guy made another subtle hand signal to his bodyguards, both of which were now situated at the bar. One got up and walked the perimeter of the room. Then he moseyed into the casino. When he returned to his barstool, he sat back down and nodded over at the boss. "Miss," Antonio said, calling over to Sutton.

"Yes, sir."

"This cappuccino's cold. Take it back; I changed my mind." He pointed to the two coffees sitting in front of the preachers. "And take these away too. We don't need anything else. Get lost."

Sutton grappled with the plates and cups, gathered them in a pile and returned to the kitchen. "He made us," she reported. "I couldn't hear a thing out there over the noise."

Antonio's right hand rested in his lap. He wiped his flattened nose conspicuously with his left thumb—then came the unmistakable sound of the hammer of a pistol being pulled back from under the table. "You bring the cops?" he growled.

Bino almost wet his pants right then and there. Reverend Keller spoke softly but in a firm voice. "If I wanted to take this to the cops they wouldn't be spying on us right now, would they? They'd have you in jail. . . . I want to cut a deal."

"I haven't seen anything worth my time. I'm washing my hands of the whole . . ." Antonio started to swear and then stopped. "sorry, Father—the whole fiasco. Vinnie gets the heat on this one. If the cops can pin the kidnapping on him, he'll serve hard time. He's tough; he can do it."

Keller nodded faintly. "The next thing I have to tell you is the most important of all. See, I've been in contact with a few of your employees here in the hotel. I know for a fact they're employed by you."

Antonio laughed out loud. "The only men I've got are those two over there. They've proven they can be trusted."

Suddenly, out in the kitchen, one of Horne's men began to scream over the radio. "I've got a visual on the old woman!"

"Where is she?"

"Headed your way."

Horne clicked over to Barnes's frequency. "What do you want me to do?"

"Play it out."

Nurse cleared the entrance to the bar and took a seat at a table near the door. Cap'n also sauntered back into the room and parked himself at a lone table on the other side of the room.

"See that old woman?" Keller said, gesturing towards Nurse.

"What about her?"

"Whether you know it or not, she's been working for you. She has the phone records to prove it."

Antonio scoffed, then swore under his breath. "I've never seen her before in my life."

"That's not how she'll testify. Matter of fact, she's the one that orchestrated the entire scam with the politicians. She's a homeless friend of mine. The FBI's here in the building looking for her. My guess is the only reason she hasn't been arrested is because they can't link you and her together yet."

Shakily, Bino unfolded the afternoon headlines and slid the newspaper across the table. *Mitchell Wilson, Son-in-law to Congressman MacArthur, Arrested for Murder*. As Antonio scanned the print, Keller rested his finger on Mitch's front-page, black-and-white photo. "He's another friend of mine—the one who shut down Three Queens. He witnessed Vinnie kill a Federal agent in cold blood. Now Vinnie's blackmailing him, using the gun as leverage. He's also blackmailing a different friend of mine on another murder he committed."

Antonio eased his gun back in his jacket pocket and lurched to his feet. "And now I'm finished with *your* feeble attempt at blackmail."

"We're not blackmailing you, Mr. Domenico. We're just the messengers—and sometimes it's the messengers that end up getting hurt. See that big black man over there?" Antonio turned his head, peering across the room. "He's the *man*," Keller continued. "He's got two-hundred-fifty-thousand in his briefcase that he's just been dying to give you. It's your take on the credit card scam, money swiped from half the hotels in the city. That's what the Feds are here for. You watch, though. The second he opens the case and points to you, you'll be busted right along with Vinnie. He'll testify against you, just like the old woman will. The clincher will be the careful records he's kept and the photo records on every security camera in every hotel. The mugs of both money bags and the old lady have been in most of them. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more open-and-shut case. You'll have every politician in the state of Nevada trying to hang their problems on you. Not

to mention half the city council, guys who own the hotels. Your property will be so tied up with lawsuits, you'll never get it developed."

The blood drained noticeably from Mr. Domenico's cheeks. He sat back down and looked Keller in the eye. "You're bluffing, preacher."

"That's one thing I'm not doing. You remember Bino Daniels—ran the old Husky station out on Rancho Drive?"

"I think I met him once. The guy smokes like a stack."

"That's the one. He's on oxygen now." Antonio eyed Bino across the table, a tinge of recognition in his eyes, as Keller talked on. "No, he's not a preacher. Just another one of your once-faithful employees, ready to go under oath. Bino's been receiving the hundreds of envelopes your people have brought over the months. He's got nothing to lose. He'll squeal without batting an eye. If you're willing to find out if they're bluffing, let me ask the man with the money over to our table."

"What do you want?"

"It's simple, really. We want Vinnie, the one responsible for the murders and missing girl. Like you said, it might be good for him to do some time."

"You'd think me a fool if I took your word on all this supposed evidence."

"You'll just have to trust us, just like we have to trust you. I've done some homework on you, talked with a couple of priests in your old neighborhood. They say your word is good, even for a wise guy."

Antonio laughed. "They still use that term—wise guy?"

The reverend laughed too. "If it fits."

Domenico pursed his lips, thinking. Then he gave a nod. "If what you tell me is true, I'll give you Vinnie. You have my word." That said, Antonio Domenico stuck his hand out and rose from the chair. "I like you, Reverend. I think we'll get along just fine."

Keller took hold of the brawny hand in a firm grip. "That depends, Mr. Domenico, on whether or not you break the law."

The big boss gave a jerk of his head and his two hired goons climbed down from their bar stools and took their places at his side.

Down the highway a couple of miles, Barnes had just finished talking with the agents who'd found Ritter's belt. He was not happy when he learned Mr. Domenico had simply gotten up and walked out of the hotel. "Can't we bust him on something?" pleaded Horne.

"What for? For sending cold cappuccino back to the kitchen?" Barnes

was furious. His snitch was missing and now all he had left was an indignant old woman sitting in New York, New York's bar room. And she'd be as tight-lipped as the tooth fairy about her day's activities. The promises she'd received from the Federal government for special consideration if she'd cooperate with the investigation didn't mean a thing to her. For that matter, Barnes mused, the angry old lady probably would withhold information just to spite the FBI.

The hour-and-a-half conversation had been guarded at first. Mother and daughter, guests of the FBI, were each finishing a hundred-dollar plate atop the lavish Sheraton. Their chat had revolved mainly around safe subjects: the MacArthurs' D.C. apartment, its interior decor, the congressman's reelection bid, what Stephanie's older brother was up to, and when the babies were due—not necessarily in that order.

When the small-talk had been exhausted and the inevitable, uncomfortable silence set in, both women at once opened their mouths to speak. "How's daddy?" "How's Mitch?"

Each smiled and fidgeted with her dessert. "I'm leaving him," Levina finally blurted out. "I know I've needed to do it for years, I've just never had the courage. You're the first one I've told."

"But, Mom, you do love him, right? Why? . . ."

"For three years I've pled for him to phone you and tell you we wanted you back—Mitch, too. But he's just too proud. He wouldn't hear of it. His life, his image always takes priority. And I end up being the floor mat, a place to wipe his feet when he gets them dirty. I'm always the dutiful wife who puts on her 'pretty face' in public. I can't do it anymore. . . ."

"But, mother . . ."

"Shh. It's okay. I've made up my mind. Actually, in a way you helped me decide. I've always secretly admired your courage. You never needed him like I did. You could tell him no; ever since you were a baby you could tell him no. I used to wish I could. . . . But I've never been able to tell him no—not from our first date."

"I'm sorry, Mom. I had no idea."

"Your father's the kind of man who will take everything he can get. If he knows I'm not behind him, he'll try to ruin me. I need your help."

"Mother I . . ."

"No, I'm sorry. This isn't the time to talk about it." Mrs. MacArthur

blotted her crimson lips with a napkin. "I need to know more about Mitch and your in-laws."

After hearing her mother's confessions, Stephanie's head was spinning. Where could she begin? How could she recap all that had happened over the past week and a half? "He didn't do it mother," she said, coming straight to the point. "He's a good man. I love him more than anything."

"I can see it in your eyes, dear. They sparkle when you mention his name."

"He grew up in kind of a rough environment, though. He lived with his grandpa." Stephanie smiled as she pictured the old codger, his wrinkled, beet-red face, his eyes squinched in a perpetual scowl. "He's such a neat old guy. Full of love and compassion, despite his gruff exterior."

"Your father's grandpa was a pig farmer in Iowa."

"So why is Dad so pumped to succeed, so concerned about his image?"

Levina took a sip of her wine. "Perhaps he doesn't want to remember where he came from. Maybe he's so busy trying to forget his family's past that he can't see the forest for the trees—if that makes sense."

Stephanie nodded. "He'd like Mitch, if he'd just give him a chance. He's a fantastic student; he wants to be a great father—I've never seen anyone more anxious to have children. And he treats me so wonderfully. He listens when I talk, he's got a great sense of humor, he loves me for who I am."

"He sounds a little like your father, thirty years ago."

"Yeah, maybe he is a little like Dad, except Mitch is always the first to apologize, Dad's always the last. You'll like him; his grandfather, too." Stephanie gave a start. "Oh, I didn't tell you. Grandpa had a heart attack a few days ago; I need to go see him again."

Levina plucked the napkin from her lap and set it on the table. "What are we waiting for?" she said, suddenly energized. "I'm dying to meet him."

FORTY-EIGHT

TWENTY-TWO MILES NORTH of Las Vegas the Jaguar exited I-15 and headed north on Highway 93. The glare of the western sun burned hot through the driver's window. Vinnie was confident he hadn't been followed. Aside from Ritter's bugged belt, the Feds had no other means of tracking him. Ritter was still proclaiming his innocence—*loudly*—but all that would shortly change. Up to this point the scheme had seemed to unravel at every turn, and the mobster's mind reeled in ragged desperation. Outright elimination of the adversary—or at least taking out as many of the foe along the way—seemed a most appropriate and diabolical remedy.

"Look, mate," groveled the Englishman, "they can't tail us without the belt. I don't have no reason to lie to ya'. The government ain't no gravy-train, and I didn't much care for their terms anyways. But I could make a future joinin' up wit' a smart man like you. You got connections."

Vinnie hadn't uttered a word since the belt episode. Tight-lipped, he stared out onto the highway, where ripples of hotfooted air scuttled up from the insufferably blistering asphalt and distant fronds of sagebrush tossed their heads in the feeble breeze. Ritter's voice took on a more fervent tone. "I could even go back out t' the streets. Be your informant. Thirty bucks a day—that'd be peanuts for a guy like you. . . ."

Vinnie's mood instantly mutated from sullen to seething. Fishing in the pocket of his silk-lined jacket, he withdrew a small revolver, wrapped in a plastic bag. Hot rubber tires chafed against the jagged, volcanic-pebble blacktop as the Jag swerved to the shoulder and skidded to a stop. "Shut up!" he howled. Then the trash-talking began in earnest. Ritter was the most sorry person on earth—no, he didn't deserve the high honor of even being called a person. He was the stool, the scat, the dung squeezed from the lowest organism. And now the sewage had run its suicidal course. By siding with the Feds, Ritter had committed the most fatal of mistakes. The gangster's cold barrel pressed against the side of Ritter's head.

"I've heard enough a' your miserable whinin'," ranted the tough guy.

“You made your bed—now you’re gonna sleep in it. . . . Haven’t you figured it out yet?” A dull whimper surfaced from Ritter’s closed, quivering lips. But when the trigger didn’t squeeze, apparently eclipsed by his opponent’s better judgement, Ritter took confidence—and launched a different, more bold tack. “Whatcha mean ‘haven’t I figured it out yet?’” Turning his head, he stared down the gun’s barrel, a straight-line smile spreading over his thick lips. “Just did, chump. Just did.”

Vinnie cocked his head. “Did what?”

“Figured it out. I figured out that you’re about the dumbest bloke I ever met.”

Vinnie immediately drew back the gun barrel and slashed his passenger up-side the head. Blood gushed from Ritter’s temple, smearing onto the leather upholstery and soaking into the dark beige flooring. “You’re a dead man,” Vinnie hissed.

Ritter’s head sagged onto the headrest. “And you’re going t’ have t’ do a lot better than that if ya’ want t’ scare me, you bloody-stupid bully,” he sputtered. “I been playin’ ya’ like a violin, just like Mitch and the mute that stole your car; just like the old woman that set ya’ up, the one that lives in your alley. You’re a bloomin’ coward, hidin’ behind your guns and your uncle’s apron. You wouldn’t know a good fight if it stepped up an bit ya’, and if ya’ did, you’d throw a low blow—just like you’ve always done.”

The hothead’s volatile nature bumped up yet another notch. The venom flowed freely from his mouth. He heaved himself from the car and circled it like a tiger, demanding Ritter climb out. Ritter refused to budge—just kept flinging muddy, sharp-tongued insults. “You already spilt me blood in your car,” he goaded. “Gonna have t’ burn it like *I* did *your* garage. Shame you’ll lose two expensive rides in the same day. All your silk suits and fancy gold jewelry, and you still ain’t as smart as the bloody homeless bums that beg at your kitchen.”

Reckless gunfire split the desert air, squelching Ritter’s tirade. He clenched his teeth and bent over in pain, his kneecap shattered by the searing bullet. A burst of screams was followed by a breathless groan, whereupon he lashed out again. “Been waitin’ for a mistake like that, ya’ stupid bloke,” Ritter raved on through gritted teeth. “Now ya’ got a bigger problem. Me guess is, ya’ got two shots left.” His voice broke. Vinnie again brought the gun up to the patsy’s head, his hand trembling with anger. Then Ritter resumed his goading. “See, if that’s th’ gun that killed Mike, you can’t use it t’ frame Mitch no more. He’s in lock-

up, an' the cops know I was in one piece when I climbed in your car. If you ain't got your piece t' hide behind no more, you got to kill me wit' one bullet so you can keep the other to be brave. Without your gun you're nothin', you . . ."

Another shot rang out and Ritter slumped over. His body twitched, then lay still. Vinnie reached out and grabbed him by the shirt collar, hauling him from the car. Dragging the body behind a clump of sagebrush at the side of the road, he smoothed the marks in the sand made by Ritter's shoes. Then he scrambled back in the Jaguar and fish-tailed it in the direction he'd come. The car cruised along in silence, his ears still chiming from the gunshots. Suddenly another ring came from within Vinnie's jacket. Bringing the phone up to his ear, a deafening voice on the other line cried out, "Vincenzo, my boy! I thought I'd surprise you by coming to town. Wanted to see how my favorite nephew is doing."

Bumbling for words, Vinnie croaked a simple, "Uncle Antonio . . ."

"That's right. Just came from the airport. Why don't you come pick me and the boys up in your new car. Frankie told me you were havin' trouble with the old one." Antonio's voice was drum-like; the Jersey side of his accent beat a cadence alongside the rhythmic Sicilian sing-song.

Vinnie stammered. "The new one . . . it's givin' me, uh, some trouble, Antonio. I was about to call a wrecker and . . ."

"*No problemo*, Vincenzo. The boys and me will rent a car and come pick you up. Where are you?"

"I'm almost to the off-ramp at Craig," he lied.

"Great. We'll meet you there." Vinnie ended the call and jammed the pedal to the floor. In truth, he was at least 15 minutes away from the off-ramp.

Antonio shut off his phone. "You know how to get to Craig?" he asked Frankie, who sat contentedly at his side.

"Sure, dad. I been learnin' the streets real good." Frankie steered the rented limo from under the Three Queens canopy and out onto the street.

Before dropping by to see Three Queens, the boss and his boys had parked in front of New York, New York. There they watched as Nurse was arrested—shoved into a car and swept away. It hadn't been mere fanfare to impress the boys from Jersey; it was a real bust with managers being questioned and guests standing around gawking. Antonio had then made a pass around his own block to check out the incinerated body

shop and the casino's empty parking lot. Frankie had given him the run-down: all about the elevators breaking down, the power being shut off, and the pack of lawyers lining up for the kill.

Acknowledging it or not, Antonio was shaken by Vinnie's indiscretions. The family honor was at stake—and the sacrificial goat already on the skewer. Frankie was the only one who wasn't quite sure what was coming down. "Frankie," Antonio said with a touch of pathos, "you are my only son. This business will belong to you one day. I hope you can be trusted to take it over." Frankie smiled and leaned back in his seat, his father at his side, the two gorillas up front.

"You can trust me, Pops. I been learnin' lots from Vinnie, just like you said."

"Good boy. I need to know I can count on you, no matter what."

"Sure, Pops, whatever you say."

"Good, Frankie, good. This is a family problem. We'll deal with it as a family."

The hospital reported that he'd been discharged just before noon, along with a male nurse to help him settle in. The nurse answered the phone when they'd called. He'd said that grandpa was resting, but that he hadn't stopped talking about his grandson and his young wife all afternoon. Sure, the old man would be happy to see them—so long as they didn't ask him to dance.

Levina MacArthur pulled off the freeway near Logandale and drove her Lexus under the makeshift overpass. She and Stephanie had spent the hour-long drive reminiscing and catching up on news—everything from Maggie-the-good-and-noble and tarantula-eyes to Al-the-pervert-Kostecki and his no-good son Andy. Other lively topics ranged from Mitch's mechanic abilities to savory junkyard dog stew and the real, teeth-bearing junkyard dogs, gave rise to a blend of amusement and distress.

Stephanie fretted, "I've never had to get out of the car without Mitch being around," referring to the tire-biting dogs.

"Don't look at me," her mother cringed, panic written all over her face. "I'm just as scared of dogs as you."

The two women made the turn down the gravel road, their eyes scouring the yard. When the fancy car rolled to a stop, Stephanie craned her neck, scanning the auto cemetery. "They usually come sprinting out

from everywhere. As soon as Mitch opens the door and calls their names, they turn from vicious attack dogs into frisky pets.” The women cowered in their seats, but the dogs didn’t appear.

“Maybe we should honk or something.”

Stephanie gave two short blasts on the horn. After ten or fifteen seconds, a smiling man in his early 20s stepped from the trailer. “Are you Stephanie?” he called out from the porch.

Stephanie nodded from the half-masted window.

“Your Grandpa says the dogs haven’t been around since noon.”

Stephanie was first to climb from the car; Levina followed, noticeably more cautious. “Come on, Mother. It doesn’t look like they’re here at all.” Both women scrambled across the 20 feet of gravel towards the porch, one in patent-leather heels, the other swaying side to side due to a distended tummy. Safely on the wooden steps, they paused to catch their breath, and again scanned the driveway and out yard, laughing outloud at their unwarranted fears.

Grandpa had climbed from his easy chair to greet them. Dressed in a tattered robe, thin pajamas and a pair of suede slippers, worn and shiny at the toes, he plainly beamed with joy. In the few minutes it had taken for the women to get inside the trailer, he’d taken time to comb his straggly head of snow-white hair. Weathered old arms, bruised from where dozens of needles had been inserted, reached out to wrap Stephanie in a warm embrace.

The low sun cast columns of mellow rays through the hand-stitched curtains, hung many years before. The soft fabric seemed to speak of the last woman who for so many years had brought warmth both to the house and to the old man’s heart—a heart fast on the mend. “My girl,” he cackled. For a whole minute they held each other. Then Grandpa looked her in the eye and asked, “How’re you doin’?”

“I’m fine, Grandpa. I spent a half-hour with Mitch this afternoon.”

The old man leaned into his granddaughter-in-law, using her as a sort of fulcrum to keep his balance. His gaze flitted back and forth between Stephanie and the attractive woman standing nervously at the door. She, in turn, was curiously surveying the small trailer. “How’s the boy doin’?”

“We’re going to make it through this.”

“Don’t doubt that for a second . . . Just wonderin’ if his spirits are good.”

"I don't think he's ever felt better."

Grandpa finally released his hold, leaving his hand on Stephanie's shoulder, just in case. "Now, this beautiful woman," he cajoled, turning to Levina, "must be your mother."

Levina smiled. "Grandpa Wilson," said Stephanie, "this is Levina MacArthur."

Mrs. MacArthur came over in front of Grandpa and offered her hand. "I can see the resemblance," he said as he sandwiched her manicured fingers between his gnarled mitts. "No doubt where Stephanie got her beauty, Mrs. MacArthur."

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson. You're too kind. And please call me Levina."

"Only if you call me Ray."

The room suddenly went quiet, like everyone was wondering where to go from there. "Where are the dogs, Grandpa?" Stephanie finally said, breaking the awkward silence.

"Strangest thing. They was here when we came home today, but they chased some fella outta the trailer and ain't been back since. Skinny guy—looked like he was havin' the time of his life. . . ."

Stephanie's face registered alarm. "Oh, dear!" she said. "That was a friend of Mitch's. He dropped him off here when he stopped to pick up the car."

Grandpa called into the tiny kitchen, where the young aid was making a pot of coffee. "See? Don't pay to call the cops, 'less you know all the facts." Still, the old man seemed troubled. He turned back to the women. "Hope them dogs didn't hurt him. Only thing missin' was half a pot of junkyard dog stew. Stuff was so old I'm surprised it weren't growin'. The fella must a' been starvin'."

Seeing his patient was preoccupied with his visitors, the young man brought in the coffee and asked if it would be okay for him to go out for a few hours. Grandpa was more than accommodating; of course it was okay. When the door had closed and the car had rattled off down the drive, Grandpa said, "Don't mean to be coarse, but that boy asks more questions than all them doctors put together. Been careful 'bout what I tell him, though. Wouldn't surprise me if he was a cop." The old man motioned over to the kitchen table. "Oh, please sit down. I'm not used to havin' guests. Didn't mean to be unsociable."

It didn't take long for all three to warm to the friendship and even better

conversation. Levina asked about the recipe for the tasty dish she'd heard so much about—and within minutes the two women were in the kitchen peeling potatoes, the old man grunting instructions from the other room.

Barnes had been receiving plenty of instructions of his own. Field and Wilding were less than pleased that two of their key players had disappeared: Ritter, their chief informant, and Vinnie, their number one tyrant, out driving a new Jaguar. The old woman hadn't provided any help at all. In fact—and as expected—she'd been downright belligerent.

Reverend Keller, along with Bino and his new attorney friend, Congressman Dalton MacArthur were back in the Federal Building. Each remained tight-lipped concerning their latest conversations, as they were waiting to speak to 'the man.'

When Wilding entered the room, Keller stood up, arms folded across his chest, defiant as a rebellious teen. "You should have told me you were making a deal with one of my flock." He held out Ritter's papers and let them parachute down onto the table.

Wilding raised an eyebrow and took his seat. Having had little sleep, he was likewise a bit brusque. "What? Now you're his attorney, too?"

"No, but I'm sure you know Congressman MacArthur; he'll be representing my flock. And as for Mr. Ritter—just so you're aware—he's suffering from a brain tumor, still in its early stages. He didn't even tell his friends. With the tumor putting pressure on the brain, half the time he can't think straight, he's short-tempered and looking for a fight wherever he goes. His life's a mess right now. His kid brother's a junky—something he feels responsible for. I haven't even seen him in a week. He's out wanting to rob a bank or who knows what, so he can send his brother home to Yorkshire to be with his dying mother. Like I said, Ritter's whacked out most of the time, but the one thing he knows is where your agent's body *used* to be—in that meat locker. My bet is whoever he gave that *misinformation* to, *killed* him." The ex-plumber's teeth were clenched and the veins throbbed out on his forehead like little pipes about to burst from the pressure.

The bombshell had inflicted its damage. G-man and citizen alike were left speechless, giving the simmering preacher the chance to preach on. "Your contract is so full of wiggle room it won't hold daylight, let alone pay this man what you promised. If you want my help, you'd better tool up or I'll march out of here and tell the press what an ignorant, bumbling bunch of idiots you are." Keller seized the doorknob. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I

need to find a quiet place to ask God to forgive me for what I'm feeling right now."

The slamming door jarred the lights in the room. Bino shifted in his seat, desperately needing a smoke to calm his frayed nerves. A cough rose from his blackened lungs, then he softly rasped, "If you do like he . . . tells you, my daughter . . . will come out of this . . . alive. I'll testify . . . against Vinnie and his boys . . . and tell you whatever . . . you need to know."

The turn of events had kindled real hope within Congressman MacArthur. Bino's willingness to testify would greatly simplify the case, not to mention expedite its march through the judicial jungle. If the congressman sat in on the trial, for once the tide of political press would work for—rather than against—him, and hopefully help restore his good name. More importantly, it would provide him an opportunity to see his daughter and make a fresh start with her.

Up until that time, the congressman had done little—in fact, nothing, if you discount sitting and listening. Now he was about to begin to throw his weight around. He stood to leave. "I'm inclined to think these street-rats have you by the short hairs, gentleman," he said, nodding at Field in particular. "I think I need to meet with the reverend to discuss my fee. In the meantime, I suggest you take a moment to talk about how far you're willing to let this thing go."

The tribe of agents and attorneys also left the room, converging for a pow wow behind Field's office door. Field spoke first. "This preacher knows everything that's going on out on the street. How can we compete with that?"

"What's the price for his help?" asked Wilding.

The prosecuting attorney spoke up. "We have a hundred or more charges against half-a-dozen people. He wants everything dropped."

"They're mostly minor," Barnes added.

The attorney's head wagged violently. He wasn't about to let it go. "Murder's *not* a minor offense. Mr. Wilson can be charged for his participation, whether it's committing the act or as an accessory."

Wilding agreed. "We make the deal conditional. We drop everything *except* the murder charge."

The attorney again shook his head. "That's a viable alternative for all *current* charges," he said, "but what about possible *future* charges? There's missing money still out there, restitution needs to be paid to credit card companies, there are past criminal activities to consider. How's all that go-

ing to trickle down? Keller wants immunity for his people, but . . ." The ensuing 20-minute discussion became rather heated at times, but at last the meeting adjourned and the men scattered, seeing to their various duties.

Up two levels, sitting at a bench near the elevators, Congressman MacArthur and Reverend Keller had reunited. "You're an incredible man, Reverend," remarked the politician. "You can love and rail in the same breath."

Keller, his face planted in his hands, murmured, "I lost my temper. It's a weak man who can't control his temper. . . ."

Those few, short words pierced the congressman's heart to the core. "I'll take the case," he said quietly. "We can keep it from the press—it won't even be necessary to tell my daughter. I have some repenting of my own to do."

The toxic heat radiated from the blue car, flames starting to lick up from its undercarriage. Dozens of cars were backed up against the exit, and passing rubberneckers had slowed traffic to a snail's pace.

The wailing, horn-honking fire truck crossed against traffic under the overpass at Craig and jockeyed for position near the blaze. Vinnie stood with his hands shoved in his pocket, still clasping a warm cigarette lighter in one hand, the other still clutching an even hotter pistol, no longer sheathed in plastic. The distant voice was all too familiar. "Vincenzo . . ." it said. "Vincenzo, shame on you." Vinnie spun around. His uncle's cold, lifeless eyes met his own, equally callous glare. "This ain't the old neighborhood no more," Antonio whispered with a trace of melancholy. "The automobiles—they ain't so cheap these days. Times are changin', and so is the way we gotta do business."

Frankie stood next to his father, beaming with confidence, poised to begin his reign. Vinnie's brain swirled and swayed, scrolling through a thousand lies, seeking protection from the pending storm, grasping for some faint hope his own flesh and blood would understand. "Antonio . . ." Vinnie reached for his uncle's hand. A pleading kiss to the family ring might bring him back into grace.

"Don't say nothin'." The big boss pressed his finger to his lips. "I trusted you like a son, Vincenzo. Come—we have business that must be settled."

Frankie reached over and seized Vinnie's arm in a crushing grip. He had the muscle, and now his father needed *him* for a change. Instinctively, as if a fire had been lit under him, Vinnie plucked the pistol from his jacket and

stabbed it up against Frankie's chest. The blast was barely audible over the traffic and sirens and splashing water. Frankie's grip slackened. Baffled by the sudden turn of events, he looked longingly at his father, a dual plea for his blessing and forgiveness. His knees began to buckle as he watched Vinnie transfer the gun to Antonio's ribs and quietly stripped him of his weapon.

"My old man was slow—just like you," Vinnie chided. "You're right, Uncle. Times *are* changin', and old men have no business bein' in business when they can't take care of their *own* business."

By now a line of police cars and highway patrol vehicles were making their way up the shoulders of the freeway, approaching the burning vehicle. Several times they had to drive down onto the incline to pass vehicles looking to escape the tie-up. Vinnie ushered his uncle over to the limo and instructed the two burly goons to move to the curb. Antonio gave a slight nod. The curious onlookers, their eyes pinned to the burning Jaguar, didn't notice the gangster at the side of the road raise the pistol and bring it down, nor did they see the crime boss wobble like a top and crumple into the limo's front seat.

Commandeering the posh rental, Vinnie drove back up the south-bound ramp. Calls were already out via radio about the big man lying on the freeway, blood pouring from his chest. Amid a whirlwind of cars and confusion, Vinnie made his mad dash to freedom. Oncoming highway patrolmen waved him out of the way. He gladly complied by pulling down onto the grassy embankment and letting them pass.

Back at the overpass, Domenico's two huge men wrenched open a car door and jerked a woman up out of her seat in an attempt to follow the black limousine. The dozens of police cars arriving on the scene, however, blocked their way.

Unleashed from the snarl of traffic, the limo chewed up the miles. "Vincento, you will not live another day," Antonio said sternly.

"And you," spat Vinnie, his gun still trained on his hunched-over uncle, "you'll never have any respect again."

"Where'd you get this false sense of honor, Vincento? Sometimes you must bend with the wind."

"Is that what my old man did for you?"

"Your father chose his role in the family. Much like you have chosen yours."

"No, you was always bad-mouthin' him. He was nothin' but your stooge,

sent to clean up your garbage.”

Antonio grimaced in pain, a goose egg forming on his skull. “No, Vincenzo. He was my brother. He chose to stand by my side.”

“You’re a liar!” screamed Vinnie. “He was your *dog*! You sometimes tossed him a bone, but then you left him behind. You always treated him like dirt!”

“You’re wrong. . . . Vincenzo, he couldn’t read. That was a fact. He chose his role because he couldn’t read. He couldn’t take care of the business, so he took care of *business*, if you know what I mean.”

“And now I’m gonna take care of some business of my own!” Vinnie raged, his voice turning cruel and demanding. “Open your door!”

“Vincenzo, think about what you’re doing.”

Vinnie glanced in his rearview mirror. Out on the horizon, he could still see the thick cloud of black smoke rising in the air. Further beyond, a pale sun was being swallowed by the mountains, radiant shafts of light casting their brilliant-colored handiwork on the low-slung banks of clouds that hovered in the lazy western sky. Vinnie squeezed the trigger and the passenger window exploded and again he hissed, “Open your door!”

Antonio reached down and pulled the handle. As soon as the door popped open, Vinnie slammed on the brakes with his left foot and raised the other. With a mighty kick, he catapulted Antonio from the vehicle onto the unforgiving pavement. Once more gunning the engine, he fled on up the roadway, bearing down on Logandale.

Wilding, having hurriedly finished up the paperwork, slid a single sheet in front of Reverend Keller. “You sign right here.” He pointed to a blank line at the bottom of the document. “And, Mr. Daniels, you sign here.” His finger swept over to the right-hand side of the page.

The attorney, Congressman MacArthur, a man unaccustomed to flying by the seat of his pants, took a few seconds to peruse the draft one last time. It was way too simple—no fancy words, no double-talk, right to the point. A list of eight names—most homeless eyewitnesses to criminal activity—was followed by the passage: *Except for the charge of murder, all charges will be dropped and no future charges will be pressed.* This line was followed by a list of dropped charges, including credit card fraud, kidnapping, falsifying documents, improper disposal of a corpse, and so on. In return, evidence against Vincent Domenico, Clint Thurston and others would be submitted.

The document further stated that money from at least 40 casinos would be returned, except the amount spent at each casino. Totals would be gathered when the last witnesses came forward. In addition—and perhaps most importantly—a shoe box filled with computer disks would be turned over to authorities, providing the hundreds of names of those who had been wrongly defrauded.

The reverend paused and asked the congressman to step out in the hall with him for a moment. “If they find a gun and a body, will Ritter’s contract hold up?” he asked.

MacArthur smiled. “If I were them, I’d make sure it was honored. I’m not sure they’d want to have to deal with your wrath again.”

The last of the contracts signed, each defendant met the Alley Team’s new attorney, one by one, with the reverend standing at his side. When it came Mitch’s turn to speak with his father-in-law, Keller started for the door. “I’ll leave you two alone,” he said. “And Mitch, don’t forget what we talked about earlier. God can look so far forward and backward that we can’t begin to comprehend it all.” The reverend glanced back as the congressman turned to face Mitch. It was one of the rewards of the ministry: seeing families reunited. Extending his hand to Mitch, the two in-laws embarked on a conversation long overdue.

FORTY-NINE

TWO HOURS HAD CREPT BY since Cap'n returned to the hotel room. Sound still refused to let him call an ambulance. All he asked is that his big, faithful friend stay with him until the end, when the heavenly door swung open and Sound walked through. His breathing had become more shallow, the coughing spells more frequent though less intense. As his lung capacity diminished, the oxygen supply to the brain grew less and less. Sound slipped in and out of consciousness.

During one of his more lucid moments, he said his last goodbyes. Then, amid tears on both sides, he tried one last time to lift his devoted friend's spirits. "I don't want you fretting over it, Cap'n," Sound struggled to say. "It had to happen sooner or later. Now I just need a friend to see me off." With that, he drifted off and slept for almost an hour. Then came another request that almost tore Cap'n's soul to shreds. "Sing to me—tell me how it used to be when you were a boy."

Cap'n slumped down next to Sound's bony shoulders. Then, gathering him up in his arms and stroking the colorless face and limp arms, he started to sing. When every tune and lullaby he knew had been sung and re-sung, Cap'n began to tell a story, a favorite of his, all about another street-savvy character—a kind of fictional, rural-dwelling Sound. "Once upon a time, deep in the countryside, lived a rabbit. This was no ordinary rabbit. Br'er Rabbit was his name. Br'er Rabbit was a curious sort of critter, always gettin' into things he weren't supposed to be in." Cap'n hesitated, trying to remember the childhood tale. With a shrug, he set out on his own version. "This here fox kept comin' 'round, thinkin' he'd steal Br'er Rabbit's food. So the wily rabbit built him this here tar baby . . ."

Like the tar baby that stuck to everything in its path, there was only one more matter that still stuck in Vinnie's craw, one name that burned in his murky brain: *Wilson's Wrecking Yard, I-15 & Logandale*. The words—painted on the sides of the wrecker that had deposited the crushed Ferrari

at his feet—were etched in his memory. And now, nearing Logandale, he was about to erase that memory forever. A sinister grin crept over his face as he passed the five-mile exit sign. Someone would pay, and it would be someone that Mitch loved. He would deliver a final blow, reviving his dignity and position of power.

Just minutes after the final document was signed, a call came in from Grandpa's nurse. "Agent Barnes," he said. "This is Agent Gage. One of the men you've been looking for is here in the junkyard."

"Thanks, Gage," Barnes answered. "But we've struck a deal. We can wrap up the case the minute we locate Vincent Domenico. I'll send out a regular replacement for you as soon as I can."

His business with the Federal agents accomplished, Reverend Keller decided to take a spin out to the junkyard and bring Smitty home. To pass the time, he invited Bino along for the ride.

After placing his call, Agent Gage returned to the trailer and gathered his things. When he explained that the night-shift nurse was on his way, Levina and Stephanie insisted he go ahead and take off. They could take care of the crotchety old fellow until the replacement arrived. The junkyard dog stew was just starting to simmer, and by the time it reached its mouth-watering best, they'd be hungry.

Gage stowed his few belongings in the car, first tucking his sidearm in the side of the trunk, then patting the vest into place. The crisp "FBI" label reminded him that he was a new recruit. For the next few years his lack of seniority and field experience would land him only the low-risk jobs. Still, he'd hoped for a little action on this assignment.

Pulling from the gravel onto the frontage road, he made his way towards the freeway entrance. Nearing the interchange, he spied a long, black limo pass beneath the freeway, having just exited. Rather odd for the rural setting, he thought, but no big deal.

Gage accelerated up the on-ramp. Since the assignment there had been no radio contact—he'd stored his radio in the glove compartment for safe keeping. Taking it out, he flipped it on.

In the meantime, Antonio had been found sprawled on the interstate, stripped of the larger portion of his wardrobe, not to mention much of his Italian hide. When he finally came to, he found himself stripped of all self-respect as well. For a man in his mid-fifties, he'd survived the asphalt break-dance with only a scraped backside, a concussion, and a broken leg. The

old man knew exactly how to take care of business, but it would have to wait.

By the time the information trickled down to the FBI from the three law enforcement agencies responding to the calls, Gage had figured out the black limousine was not in Logandale by accident. Even as he fastened his vest in place and strapped his Glock-23 to his side, his coded call was out over the airways and he was on the fly back to the junkyard.

"You wait for back up, Gage, you hear?" Barnes called out to his rookie agent.

"Sir, Stephanie Wilson and the congressman's wife are in the trailer. I might be able to take him out before he gets there."

Barnes turned to Field, who was sitting at his desk, his blood pressure shooting through the roof. Field nodded apprehensively. The very thought of losing another agent sent shockwaves pounding at his bowels.

"Vest up, Gage," Barnes ordered.

"Done, sir."

"By the book. Only by the book," he cautioned.

"Yes, sir. I'll do my best, sir."

Before reaching the junkyard, Gage flipped off his headlights and cautiously turned down the gravelly drive. Then his heart caught in his throat. The limo was parked out near the frontage road a block from the wrecking yard, its cab empty. He'd studied the profile and knew the drill. He eased his vehicle to a stop some 50 feet away. Wiping his sweating palms on the sides of his pants, he climbed from his car and made his way cautiously along the weedy edges of the road. With nary a bit of sunlight to see by, he crept still closer. It was then that he saw movement near the front gate. Vinnie was sneaking past the yard's lone light, headed for the trailer. Gage scurried silently across the dusty yard, shadowing his prey. Crouching next to the trailer's skirting, Vinnie eased his head up and peered through the blinds. There, sitting on the couch, laughing at the old man's stories, were Levina and Stephanie.

Suddenly Gage's voice rang out through the darkness. "Vincent Domenico, FBI! Put your hands in the air or I'll be forced to shoot."

Before the word 'shoot' was even out, Vinnie had spun and emptied three rounds in Gage's direction. The agent managed to get off a single round before being struck in the chest and upper thigh by the flying slugs.

On the gravel he lay, dazed, gasping for air and bleeding profusely.

Inside the trailer, the women's screams sent Grandpa on the alert. He heaved himself up off his chair, switched off the nearby light, and whispered for Stephanie to crawl into the kitchen to do the same.

"Stef!" Grandpa whispered in the darkness. "Get a hold of yourselves. He's a punk kid."

"H-he's going to kill us," Levina whimpered.

"He's *not* gonna kill us," growled the tough old codger. Though out of breath, he crawled across the new carpet. "Follow me and be quiet." On all fours, he began to make his way down the hall.

"I can't see," Stephanie whispered.

"Come all the way down the hall." Past the bathroom he went and through the bedroom door. He kept moving at a steady pace, dragging himself to the opposite wall and up the side of the bed. Sliding open his nightstand drawer, he retrieved his vintage 9mm pistol. Then he reversed direction and scuttled across the hall to the utility room closet. Sliding the bifold door to one side, he rested his hand on the dryer, pulled himself up, and clicked down on the power breakers. All the while, the women were clutching one another, chests heaving in fright.

"Follow me," was all the old man said as he led them back into the bedroom. His damaged ticker thudded inside his chest. Part of him felt like the ex-Navy Seal he once was, the other part felt like the disabled veteran he now was.

Just then the front door exploded inward. Vinnie, dripping blood from his wounded shoulder, called out into the darkness a line used by everyone from game-playing children to Jason of chain saw-massacre fame. "Come out, come out wherever you are," he chanted—only from the tough guy's lips the words sounded at once more child-like than children at play and more sinister than a mass murderer's threat. His words sent a chill down Stephanie's spine and a lump to her throat. "I have a present to give Mitch, and you're it." He flicked the light switch. Nothing. Dogs on the howl erupted in the distant darkness, drawing ever closer.

At the opposite end of the trailer, Grandpa finished delivering his instructions. "This'll put ya' out in the junkyard," he whispered, tapping on the back door. "In the northwest corner is an old bus. He won't find ya' there. Now hurry!" His voice was gruff and pressing. "I'll slow him down." The old man pulled open the door and shoved the women out.

"But Grandpa . . ." Stephanie started to say before the door creaked

shut. Seeing there was nothing else to do, she and Levina turned and fled.

Vinnie flicked on his lighter and stared through the shadows. Staggering down the hallway, he peered into the bathroom, then reached for the bedroom door.

Grandpa hunkered down next to the bed. Just then the bedroom door burst open and the cocksure gangster, his lighter leading the way, strutted into the room. The old man pitched and rolled across the queen-size bed like an iron tumbleweed, causing Vinnie to squeeze off three shots. One more shot was fired as Grandpa crumpled from the bed and hit the floor. The barks off in the distance, mingled with approaching sirens through the partially open door, where the women had escaped only moments before. The old man lay sprawled on the floor, a fresh glimmer of hope calming his wildly beating heart as he listened to the wonderful yelps of his dogs.

Down the dark rows of rusting cars, Stephanie, hearing the echoing pops, gasped and cried out, "Grandpa!" Levina took her daughter by the arm and yanked her farther along.

The van's door said "Keller's Kitchen," but in the pitch blackness the words were indistinguishable. The vehicle's headlights lit up the gravel parking lot and the grim-looking trailer beyond. Thirty feet to the north of the structure, an agent's pale face peered up from a pool of blood, his eyes blinking against the pair of bright lights. Reverend Keller leapt from the van, simultaneously stripping the white shirt from his back. Wadding it up, he pressed it up against Gage's thigh wound to staunch the bleeding.

"Vinnie's here," Gage whispered, his breathing labored from the pain and bruises to his chest. "Stephanie . . . and her mother too. . . ." he managed to say before slipping into unconsciousness

Bino had remained glued to his seat, sucking deep breaths of oxygen through the tubes he held to his nose. "I need your help!" Keller yelled. "Get his radio and call it in." But the man was unable to move, paralyzed by the sight of the downed officer. Deep-rooted memories flashed through his mind, replaying a night he'd desperately tried to forget for 22 years. The clatter of gunfire resounded in his brain; once more he could see and smell and feel the gray matter spraying across his face. He was lying on the mean streets of LA, his partner's body slumped in the gutter, motionless.

"Bino!" Keller yelled again. "Get down here and help me!" Already pushed beyond the brink of disaster, Reverend Keller bowed his head and mumbled

a five-second prayer: "Father, forgive me for what I'm about to do. This once, I need to tell a lie." He loosened Gage's gun-belt, tugged it down his leg, and cinched it tight. Then he wrested the pistol from the man's almost lifeless fingers and strode over to the van. "Bernalillo Dalton, God needs you! Your sins are forgiven."

The frail man blinked and stared into the preacher's eyes. Keller slapped the handle of the gun into his hand and, seizing him by the shirt, lifted him from the van. "You get off your sorry horse and go help those women, or so help me, He'll strike you dead right here and now, and every one of those sins will be back on your skinny shoulders!"

Bino blinked again, then squinted down at the government-issue weapon in his hand, muttering, "I . . . can't. . . ."

"Don't tell me you *can't*!" Keller fumed as he shook him by the collar. "I say you *can*. God says you can. And if you don't, the blood of two women will be on *your* hands. You have the training, I don't, and if I don't help this officer right now, you'll have yet another person's blood on your hands."

Bino stared into Keller's eyes, which burned like fire from the reflected headlights. Keller turned back to Gage and stripped the bullet-proof vest from his torso. "Put this on," he called out, tossing it toward Bino. "Pull your suit jacket back over the top, button the preacher collar at your neck, and he won't be able hurt you. I promise." Bino peered down at the gun one more time. Then, at the reverend's final command of "Go!" he slid the handle into his palm and gave it a squeeze. At first his gait was slow and cautious. Then he flung the small oxygen tank over his back, strapped it around his chest so it rode high under his chin, and lit out in the direction of the angry barks.

Reverend Keller scooped up Gage's radio and made an emergency call. As he knelt back down and applied additional pressure to the wound, he whispered another prayer: "I will resign in the morning, dear Father. I pray that someday thou wilt forgive me. . . ."

A crescent moon nudged its silver smile above the eastern horizon as 30 FBI sedans screamed up I-15. Vinnie's left arm hung limp at the elbow. He staggered like a scourged shadow down the central aisle of the metal boneyard, Gage's slug having done its share of damage.

Somewhere up in the far reaches of the yard's northwest corner, Stephanie and her mother had been unable to find the bus Grandpa

had mentioned. Now they huddled in the cab of an abandoned Chrysler, the second up on a pile of four. Seven skittish, barking dogs bayed hysterically in the darkness at the base of the stack, eager to get at the passengers trapped inside.

"If these dogs don't leave," sobbed Levina in her best attempt at a whisper, her voice trembling, "he's going to find us."

"Maybe we need to get out . . ." Stephanie started to say, when suddenly a broad, smiling face popped up at the broken window, sending echoing screams into the night.

Out in the yard, Vinnie instantly turned and began to run towards the screams; Bino did likewise. Strangely, the dogs had gone silent.

Back inside the junked Chrysler, the utter sense of panic had begun to evaporate. Smitty's frantic array of hand signals were trying to convince the women to climb from the vehicle. "Are you Smitty?" Stephanie asked, her eyes darting about. Smitty nodded enthusiastically. "Mitch told me you're his friend." Smitty nodded again and gave the startled young woman a hug. From all the stories Mitch had told him, he felt as if he had known her forever. Her fears lessened, Stephanie reciprocated. Then she shivered and whispered, "There's a man after us, Smitty. I think it's Vinnie."

Smitty cocked his head to the side, listening. In turn, the stifled dogs' ears perked up as they awaited a command from their new found friend. Squatting down next to them, he began puffing little wisps of air through his teeth, producing a chain of soft trills. Seconds later, he aimed his face at the moon. One by one the dogs joined in, adding their voices to his shrill scream, hurling an eerie wave of territorial howls through the warm night air.

The churning pandemonium made Vinnie stop in his tracks. Bino, however, pressed forward, his courage fortified with every step. It pumped at his lungs, at his heart and mind; it pounded at his thoughts as he groped his way among the piles of cars. It was then he remembered why he'd joined the force so many years ago. He'd wanted to do good, to see that justice was served. He thought of his friend Mike, whose life had been snuffed out, and of his daughter who was being held captive. And those thoughts all focused back on the fiendish Vinnie, somewhere out there in the yard.

The wail of sirens could be heard more strongly now, easily drowning out the comforting prayers of one Bart Keller, still crouched on

the ground next to the trailer, holding the wounded officer in his arms.

With the restless dogs primed for their mission, Smitty signaled the women to return to the safety of the car. Then he climbed to the top of the stack, a veritable king of Wilsons Junk Yard, and began to leap from one pile of cars to the next, the pack of dogs following below.

Vinnie, unable to tell from which direction the babbel came in the echoing maze of autos, struggled to reach the top of a pile of cars. From his perch, he looked on in disbelief as Tarzan of the Junkyard leapt closer and closer at every bound. Drawing a bead on the dancing figure, he squeezed off three rounds. Smitty stumbled, then plunged between two closely stacked piles of cars. There he lay, half unconscious, tightly wedged two feet off the oily ground.

Clambering triumphantly down from the cars, Vinnie, his adrenaline flowing and intent upon finishing off his prey, continued to weave his way through the junkyard, once more following the sound of whining dogs.

Then suddenly, floating not more than 20 feet in front of him, came an unexpected sight. Illuminated by the flicker from a cigarette lighter, Bino's face appeared. The lank man was lighting a smoke. He couldn't tell if Bino was aware he was there or not; his face registered no look of alarm. But whether he was aware of it or not, the two-bit gambler was standing guard between himself and the fallen Smitty, who was in danger of being licked to death by the pack of distressed dogs. Vinnie continued squinting at the strange sight. Each time Bino sucked air through the cigarette, its tip cast an orange glow down the front of his coat.

Less than 25 yards away, Smitty struggled to force air into his cramped lungs. The confused dogs, sensing his desperation, began to howl. Vinnie raised his weapon and stepped out into the open. The smell of gasoline was strong in the air, as a steady drip seeped from the gas tank of a nearby car struck by one of Vinnie's wild bullets. "Bino?" intoned Vinnie, as if he were staring at a ghost.

Bino didn't flinch. "Drop your gun . . . or burn in hell," he muttered, speaking over the eerie yelps and whimpers.

Vinnie smirked. "You wearin' a preacher's coat?"

"Drop your gun," Bino repeated, a bit louder.

Vinnie lifted his chin and laughed at the moon. "What, you've come to send me off?" he roared. Suddenly his head dropped and he lunged forward, firing a single shot directly at Bino's heart. Bino staggered

backwards, a shrill hissing sound streaming from his chest. The light-weight metal bottle he had strapped to his shoulders dropped from under the preacher's coat and tumbled at Vinnie's feet, gently rocking back and forth before coming to rest in a well-worn loader track in the road. Vinnie glanced down at the puddle of gasoline he was standing in as the gust of oxygen buffeted his pant leg and up his front.

Bino snatched the stub from his lips and stuck it between his thumb and forefinger. A miniature cascade of glowing sparks shot through the air. In near perfect form, the cigarette butt hurtled end over end and bounced against Vinnie's lapel. Vinnie slapped at the glowing stick, but failed to keep it from ricocheting off his chest and dropping steadily to the ground.

Reverend Keller looked up from his prayer as a "whoosh!" filled the air and a tiny mushroom cloud rose above the heaps of cars to the north. Seconds later, a bevy of government vehicles skidded to a stop in the drive. Grandpa then stumbled from the trailer, holding a washrag to his head, a trickle of blood dripping between his fingers. "Father," the reverend said, casting his eyes once more to the heavens. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for the loss of one of your children. I will try harder. I promise. . . ."

FIFTY

THE SUN ASCENDED IN A BLAZE of glory to the east as dark desert clouds gathered from the west and began to boil over the dusty junkyard. A few reporters lingered on the porch like hungry dogs waiting for one last table scrap. Each hoped to cull one final tidbit of information from the army of iron-jawed agents out combing the wreckage for any undiscovered clues.

Reverend Keller emerged from the seclusion of the trailer's tiny utility room, where he'd spent the last three hours on his knees. The prayer had been mostly of thanks, mixed with fervent and persistent pleadings. Pleadings for Vinnie, a man burned beyond recognition, appeals for him to live if his soul was worth saving, or, if not, that his suffering would be minimal. Petitions on behalf of another man, Bino, brave beyond words, who heroically had peeled the borrowed jacket from his shoulders to smother the flames, despite the serious burns received to his hands and face. Prayers for a young girl so petrified during her three-days in captivity that he knew only God and her own father would be able to teach her how to feel safe again. Cries of mercy for the mute who had been rushed to the hospital for a CT scan of his cracked skull. Prayers of hope that Ritter's life had been spared. A simple supplication in behalf of the devoted and tireless Cap'n, that he would be comforted as he steadfastly stayed by the side of his friend. And, last but not least, entreaties that the unforgettable, skinny vagabond Sound would peacefully and valiantly realize his dream of passing through the beautiful door leading to the other side.

But, again, the reverend's prayers were mostly of thanksgiving, thanks for the lives spared, thanks that the medical team had arrived so quickly, thanks that so many wonderful individuals and families could go on loving and living.

The moment Keller walked out on the front porch and gazed up into the darkening sky, the storm's first big raindrop splattered on the top of his shiny head and drizzled down past his cheek. It was as if a smiling tear had

sought him out, to tell him, at that very moment, that everything would work out for the best. He climbed into his van and made his way back onto the frontage road. He thought of the day that lay ahead. Cook was probably scooping mush and listening to the complaints of hungry patrons wanting cold orange juice and milk again. A fridge that had once housed a body probably should be retired for good. It might be a good day to go shopping for a new one. Yup, it was back to the grindstone again. *No rest for the wicked*, he thought.

He smiled as he merged onto the freeway. Rolling his window down a tad, he smelled the desert air, washed clean by the cleansing storm. A persistent mist shot up in front of him, the result of spinning tires hammering on rain-drenched asphalt. It hovered in the damp, electric air, then came to rest on nearby plants, oncoming windshields, or back onto the pavement to be trounced once more. In essence, in filling the measure of its creation, the rain—each individual droplet—was evolving through its cycle of existence.

Already in town, Mitch and Stephanie milled about the hospital, waiting for Grandpa to get the last of the stitches pulled tight on his tough old skull. He was retelling the story for the fifth time that day. The doctor's assistant, busily closing the wound, nodded politely as he listened to the chilling narrative of how the bullets slapped the bed in the dark room as he rolled across it, tumbled off, and struck his head on the nightstand.

The minute Nurse was released from custody, she climbed on a bus and headed for New York, New York. A fax from Congressman MacArthur and a brief chat via cell phone convinced the management to let her up to the 8th-floor room.

Unlocking the deadbolt and pressing her head inside, instantly she knew what had happened. The smell of death enshrouded the entire room. Cap'n stood at the window, still holding Sound's limp body in his arms and speaking softly, telling him of the passing thunderstorm.

Reverently she stepped to his side and looked out across the valley, pensive, serene. "He loved th' rain, didn't he?" she said at last. "I watched him dance in th' puddles in Eddie's alley one day 'bout a year ago."

Squinting through the tears, Cap'n peered down at the stooped little woman; she gazed up at him. Her eyes too had flooded over. Notwithstanding her pained, glum spirit, she smiled, gently coaxing his cheeks also to lift. His words came in labored sobs. "You was . . . afraid he might get sick 'gain."

Nurse chuckled softly and again scanned the overcast horizon. "I wanted t' tan his hide. . . . Spent all them days nursin' him back t' health, an' how'd he repay me? Danced in th' rain. . . ."

A droll grin appeared on Cap'n's face. "And then he had t' start runnin', you chasin' him with a stick an' all. Funniest thing I ever seen—an old woman, soakin' wet, chasin' some skinny fella down the alley with a stick in her hand."

"He knew I was funnin' with him, didn't he?"

"He knew, all right. His dancin' in the rain was his way of showin' how much he cared 'bout you. I think it was 'bout the best compliment any man could pay. He was alive and kickin'; shakin' an' bakin'. Wanted you to know it; wanted you to know you had a part in it."

"He knew he was dyin'. We knew, too, didn't we Cap'n? But after his rain dance, I never heard a word a' complaint come from his lips."

Cap'n looked down into the calm visage of his compatriot and friend, and whispered, "Ya' know, he sighed. . . . When he opened the door, he sighed."

"Musta' been rainin' there too."

"Probably was."

Cuddled side by side, they stared across the newly-scrubbed landscape a few silent moments longer. Then Nurse stretched her warped hands to help pry Sound's stiff body from Cap'n's frozen grasp. "Here, now . . . let's put him down."

It was two days before word came in from the hospital: Vinnie had died. That same day, Ritter's body was found by a passing motorist. A father and his young son had gotten out of their truck to explore along the highway. The smell had sent them searching.

For the local G-men, the taxing week had become even more taxing, what with the spate of reports and follow-up reports and non-stop phone calls. Wilding had resisted wiring the fifty-thousand dollars to Yorkshire, until Reverend Keller reminded him it wouldn't cost the government a dime. You see, explained Keller, Vinnie's attorney had previously put up a fifty-thousand-dollar bail bond on Ritter. It was the only—and best—way for the posted money to be spent.

Aside from the FBI, most everyone else had caught their collective breath and were ready to saturate their lives with some mind-numbing dullness. Each assessed the part he or she had played in the often dizzying, exhaust-

ing previous two weeks.

Cook—all by himself—had managed to get Errol on the plane to London. A day later, the reverend had worked out the details to get him in a local drug program in England. Phoning the program manager, Keller had explained, “I assure you, sir, I’ve known Mr. Ritter for many years. You know as well as I do that in the first few days they’ll say anything to get out. He’ll be himself again when you get him cleaned up. . . . Yes, doctor, you have a good day too. Cheery-o.” He hung up the phone. When Cook shot him a funny look, Keller justified his words. “That wasn’t even close to a lie. Ritter *will* be himself again in a few days—Errol Ritter, that is. . . . And what did you give him, anyway, to get him on that flight?”

“A couple of sleeping pills,” answered Cook. “I told him they’d get him at least 30-thousand feet off the ground.”

The reverend laughed, then peered around the big man to the doorway, where stood a woman, peeking into the office. “Excuse me?” she said. “Is one of you Reverend Keller?”

Cook, not wanting to ruin his reputation, replaced his grin with a glower and marched from the office, muttering under his breath about the new fridge—donated by one of the big hotels—that hadn’t yet arrived.

“I guess that would be me,” the reverend chuckled. “Please come in. How can I help you?”

The woman reached into her purse. “I’m Linda Hart,” she said. “You sent me this letter?”

Keller felt a jolt shoot up to his brain and back down his to his toes. “Come in . . . sit down. Sorry my office is such a mess. Sunny. . . . I mean Greg’s helping me put a new zip drive in my computer. I expected him back an hour ago.”

She settled herself on the edge of her seat and asked point-blank, “Did Greg really write this letter?”

“He did—straight from the heart.”

Linda stared down at the floor. Then her eyes penetrated Reverend Keller’s relaxed gaze. “Would you be willing to help us?”

“I’d be *more* than willing,” he said over the yells and hurried footsteps out in the gymnasium. He rose and stepped over to the door to see what all the commotion was about.

Nurse was shuffling across the wood-slat floor, with Greg a step behind. “We gots good news,” she crowed.

"We *have* good news," corrected Greg.

"Whatever . . ." Nurse said, a bit put out by his constant nagging. She coasted up to the reverend and focused her new eyes on his, ready to deliver the knock-out bulletin.

But Greg interrupted her account with a teasing "If'n ya' wants my hep, ya' gots t' say it right!"

"Ok-ay, ok-ay, smart al-eck," she said, accentuating each syllable. "We *have* good *news* to *tell* you." With every fourth word she spoke, her new teeth stuck to her gums for just a split second, leaving her frustrated. And so she yielded to Greg's grammatical graces. "You just go 'head an' tell him so's it don't take so long."

"So it doesn't . . ."

"Jus' say it!" she hooted.

Greg flinched in mock alarm, then started in. "The results came back from the neurologist. They think they can stimulate the speech centers in Smitty's brain by removing some of the scar tissue from the frontal lobe of his left hemisphere."

The reverend smiled. "Funny how things work isn't it?" he said.

"An' that ain't all. Tell him, Sunny," Nurse added excitedly.

"*Isn't* all."

Nurse's penetrating glare—a genuine 'dirty look'—spoke more than a thousand words. She was fed up with his nitpicking and meddling and just wanted him to get on with the conversation. Greg swallowed and smiled sheepishly as she waved him to carry on. He wrapped his arm around Nurse's spindly shoulder and resumed his account, deliberately peppering it with a decidedly poor southern twang. "This here ol' woman tramped into Antonio Domenico's hospital room—all by herself, mind ya'—and asked if he'd be interested in payin' the cost a' the surgery. And when she came out, he'd not only agreed t' pay fer Smitty, but also t' be a permanent sponsor of Keller's Kitchen and . . ." Greg's drawl was stopped cold as his gaze fell on the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, standing in the reverend's doorway.

Keller's brow furrowed. Giving Nurse a dirty look of his own, he began to scoot her away. "A crime boss? Rats! What'd you tell him?" he bickered. "We can't accept . . ."

Nurse wasn't paying any mind to Keller's squawks. "No wonder he's been pinin' over her," she said, beaming. "She seem's like a fine woman."

"Nurse, what did you do?"

Nurse soaked the moment for all it was worth. “She’s a fine lookin’ woman. . . .”

“I can’t accept money that’s been cursed.”

“No need t’ bellyache, Reverend. Don’t give it no mind. Man asked how he could be a’ service t’ his new neighborhood, an’ I give him a thought ‘r two. Want’s t’ do it, though, I’m tellin’ ya’. If’n he’s gonna have a fancy new hotel in this city, he don’t need no problems from nobody. Want’s t’ fit in, is all. If’n you know what I mean.”

“*If*—the word is *if*!” grumped Keller.

Nurse pursed her lips. “Don’t need two a’ ya’ tellin’ me how t’ talk.”

The reverend glanced over at Greg, who sat in the corner, talking with his wife. They were holding hands. “I think there will be only one of us from here on out. Besides, who’s going to teach Smitty to talk if you don’t learn how yourself?”

“Point well taken,” she said.

Across the room, Greg’s fingertips lightly stroked Linda’s hand. “You didn’t take off your ring.”

“I didn’t finish filing the papers. . . . I see you didn’t take yours off, either.”

Greg tugged at his ring, trying to pull it free. “It wouldn’t come off,” he teased. Then, just like that, the ring slipped off his finger. “I guess I finally lost a little weight,” he laughed. Using a firm, twisting motion, he anchored it back on. “It wouldn’t feel right if it wasn’t there.”

Linda gave her husband the once-over. “You look good,” she said. “Yes, you’ve definitely lost some weight.”

Greg nodded, still twirling the ring loosely on his finger. He felt the load of guilt and selfishness he’d been carrying gradually lifting from his shoulders. He gazed over at the reverend, now heaven-bent on helping Nurse with her English. He’d helped him, too. “I know,” he said. “It feels good.”

In a weird and ironic twist of fate, both Bino and Vinnie had ended up in the same burn unit, only two beds away from each other. One man lay in utter pain, bitter and scared, blindly lashing out at anyone in his path—including a good reverend who came to offer comfort. In everlasting hatred, the man dismissed the preacher’s visit as the act of a “blankety-blank goody two-shoes.” He didn’t need a preacher because there was no God. . . . Even in the one moment when he’d caught a glimpse of Bino, he’d

declared his disgust and told him he'd see him in hell.

The other man, meanwhile, was learning how to love and forgive. . . . He knew it all needed to start with himself. The young girl at his bedside was learning right along with him. In addition to trying to patch up the multiple emotional and spiritual wounds, Bino, at the insistence of his doctors, was already working with a physical therapist. Three times a day she would come by to help him stretch his muscles and maintain good range of motion in his joints. The painful sessions, in Bino's mind, were all part of the soul-refining process. His oxygen had been boosted to near a hundred percent to keep his stats up to a normal level. It would be months before he would recover, if ever. He knew that, in truth—even with God's help and the hope and prayers of others—it would take years for both him and Angelina to fully recover. "It must have been . . . terrible for you," Bino whispered through the pasty layers of thin bandages stuck to his face.

"But you killed him, Daddy," she said, a note of triumph in her innocent voice. "It said so in all the papers. You're a hero." His beloved Angelina looked down proudly at her father. Her dark eyes seemed to be searching for a reason to hate. "I'm no hero," Bino struggled to say, his teeth clenched. "I waited too long . . . to put out the flames."

"But he shot you, he deserved to die."

Bino thought back to that night long ago on the streets of LA. He'd hesitated a second too long. The consequences had been deadly. An innocent life had been taken, two families left fatherless. "I can never . . . revel in it, Angelina. A man . . . is dead. He had . . . to be stopped."

"But he sent those men to kidnap me."

"I know . . . it must have been . . . terrible."

"It was." The girl's lip began to quiver—then she broke down, sobbing.

"Now, now," Bino whispered sympathetically. He lifted his bandaged hand and put it on hers. Then he began to speak of forgiveness. Angelina needed to find it in her heart to forgive him for his horde of mistakes; they both needed to find a way to forgive the man who had brought them so much sorrow.

The congressman and his wife sat side by side on the sofa, the distance between them having narrowed considerably over the preceding two days. Somehow he'd managed to stay away from the throngs of reporters, with their prying cameras and microphones. And somehow he'd learned the power of those simple words: "I'm sorry." Even without counseling, he'd

begun to realize the myriad blunders he'd made in his marriage. Now he was intent on mastering the relationship skills he'd long neglected.

The meek yet confident little man facing them on the swivel chair was named Paul. The lilliputian wire-rimmed spectacles that perched on his fragile nose were in stark contrast to his enormous bald head. Equally out of place was his curious, whimsical personality. Dry puns and clever quips spewed almost at will from the mouth of this rather mousy-looking fellow. He spoke with a funny lisp, a flaw that strangely accentuated his playful temperament. There was no extravagant office, no fancy doctor's degrees on the wall. But the man had come highly recommended, compliments of an ex-plumber who'd fixed his overflowing toilet years before.

Once the preliminary getting-to-know-you questions were out of the way, Paul turned his discerning gaze on Dalton MacArthur and asked, "What do you want to accomplish in these sessions?"

The congressman spoke candidly of his weaknesses. "I need to learn how to communicate and bring love back into my home. For many years I've been guilty of shoving it away."

"Good, good," nodded the counselor. "And you, Mrs. MacArthur?"

"I want my family back. I want us to be close, to be able to say how we feel and to be understood."

"I think, with some effort, we can find a way," Paul said, connecting the tips of his fingers to form a little pyramid. "I want you to try a little experiment with me. Will you do that?" The couple nodded. "Mrs. MacArthur—do you mind if I call you Levina? . . . Fine. Levina, will you kneel on the carpet for a moment?" She knelt down. "Now, Congressman MacArthur—or should I say Dalton? . . . fine—would you please stand up on the couch?"

He hesitated. "With my shoes on?"

"Sure," Paul nodded, "the shoes will be fine." The congressman tentatively lifted one foot onto the couch, then brought the other up. "Now, Levina, look up at him." Lifting her face, she gazed into her husband's eyes. "Now how do you feel?"

For a full 30 seconds Levina knelt there, her eyes riveted on the imposing figure standing above her, her fixed stare boring into her husband's soul. Then she began to tear up. She raised a hand in embarrassment as the congressman, towering above her, shifted nervously on his feet. Then Paul stood up and reached for the congressman's hand. "Here, let me help you down." He was brought into a kneeling position, facing his wife. Interlocking the couple's hands, Paul next asked, "Now, how does this feel?"

Each looked over at the other. Levina smiled through her tears. "This feels better."

Paul nodded, then continued. "Now hold each other close. . . . As you do, Dalton, tell me about the first time you met your beautiful wife, your sweetheart. What attracted you to her?"

Dalton opened his mouth, but nothing would come out, he was so overcome with emotion. Finally he was able to speak—and the words and tears flowed freely. "I loved her right from the start . . ." As he spoke, the feelings in the room magically changed from friendship and tolerance to deep and lasting love. When he'd finished, Paul turned to invite Levina to share her feelings.

More tears were shed, bridges were spanned, hearts were mended, and the hour was soon over. Paul checked his calendar. "I'll see you next week then?"

The congressman instinctively reached for his planner, then paused. "Yes, of course. We'll be flying home once a week to be with our family."

"Good. Let me say how much I admire you both. Two beautiful people—thrill seekers, in a way—willing to come back for more fun and excitement. We have a lot of work to do, but I can see it will be worth it."

The last of Mitch and Stephanie's things had been loaded on the back of the wrecker and a rented trailer hitched behind when Joan pulled into the driveway next door. The battered El Dorado, its brakes grinding, rumbled to a halt at the side of the house and Joan got out. Mitch looked to Stephanie for her approval. Taking her by the hand they turned toward Joan.

"Good morning, Joan," Mitch called out as they walked together up the drive. "How's Al doing?"

Joan appeared more ragged than ever. Her arm was cast and strapped to her shoulder with a sling. Dressed in her waitress outfit, she'd already been off work at least three hours. "He's responding," Joan said warily, her raspy voice heavier than her arm.

Mitch cleared his throat and said, "We want to thank you for what you did."

Joan shrugged. "The putz had it comin'."

"Will they prosecute?"

"Who knows. He can't even lift a spoon to his mouth, let alone

defend himself on attempted rape charges.”

Hard-pressed to know what to say next, Mitch rotated his bum wrist, still sore from his run-in with the police. “So . . . what will you do?”

Joan, storm clouds gathering in her eyes and thunder in her breast, looked back and forth between Mitch and Stephanie. “I don’t know. I’ve been married to the man almost thirty years. He might just make a better husband being spoon fed than he was before.” She peered off down the lonely cul-de-sac, her eyes flooding with grief.

Stephanie nodded, her heart filled with compassion. The woman had lost her husband and son in the same day, one from a disabling blow to the head, the other to a five-year sentence in the Federal penitentiary. Mitch, sensing his wife’s heartbreak, reached over and pulled her close. Joan saw how in love the young couple were. An anxious quiet fell over the little gathering. How she wished she could feel even a fraction of that kind of love in her own life.

Stephanie’s heart finally burst. “I’m so sorry,” she wailed, wrapping the woman in her arms.

Joan guardedly returned the embrace. It had been so long since she hugged someone. Pulling Stephanie in a bit closer, she then released her grip, laughed—or rather, coughed—wiped her cheeks and said, “Ah, what the heck. I’ll make do. I’ve got one less mouth to feed and one more kid to raise. He’ll sit around watching TV, not that much different than before. At least he won’t talk back no more.” Another awkward hush fell over the trio, this time a bit less stifling.

Finally Stephanie said, “Thank you again. You’re about the bravest woman I’ve ever met.”

Joan let out a hearty laugh. “That wasn’t bravery, girl. That was thirty years of bottled-up frustration, all cocked behind that baseball bat.” She laughed again to hide the pain. Then before picking up a sack of groceries from the front seat and traipsing into her slightly more tidy house, she ended by saying, “The best of luck to both of you. You let me know when those babies are born.”

“We will,” Stephanie promised.

Hand in hand, Mitch and Stephanie made their way down the driveway, across the weeds, and back to the wrecker. He opened her door, then pulled her close, cradled under his arm, and asked, “How’d you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Make friends with her?”

The question was a healing balm to Stephanie's ears. She could never understand how Mitch got along so well with the punks down the street. Maybe she'd finally discovered a clue. "It's simple. She doesn't have anybody."

"I know."

"She's a lonely, broken-hearted woman with a broken man and little hope for happiness. Believe it or not, as rotten as Al is, he's all she has."

Mitch took her cheeks in his hands and drew her face up to his. "If *you* were all I had," he sighed, "it would be enough for a lifetime. But it doesn't stop there. You're giving me children and joy—and love. You stood by me through a terrible ordeal, and trusted me when nobody else did, when everything looked bleak. Your heart is so warm and gentle and so full of love and kindness that I'll never catch up. You're as beautiful on the inside as you are on the outside, and I swear, as long as I live, I'll never do anything again to make you doubt me."

Tears of relief and joy streamed down Stephanie's cheeks as she held Mitch's big hands in hers. Levina, yellow rubber gloves covering her hands, plaid apron around her waist, stepped from the front door of the empty house and looked out on the couple, caught up in a tender kiss. Their mutual love was warm and full of understanding, a companionship based on kindness and respect, one that could withstand the bumps of life's journey, its battery of frightening blizzards and inevitable changes. Surely there would be sadness and suffering along the way, but also great joy and growth.

Slightly flustered, Levina remained on the porch. At last she called out, "I don't mean to break you two lovebirds up, but the house is nearly clean and Dalt just called. He's waiting to talk to you." She peeled the gloves from her hands, dropped them in the cleaning bucket she'd set on the step, and came towards the truck. "We can finish this up tomorrow."

Mitch, thinking they'd been hidden behind the truck, stepped back, self consciously wiped his eyes, and helped Stephanie up into the cab. Then he opened the other door for his mother-in-law. "I'm sorry it's such a piece of junk," he apologized. "I don't think we've ever had a woman ride in it before."

"Don't apologize," Levina smiled. "Dalt and I had our share of junkers along the way. So you just don't let him give you a hard time about your hotrods. Deep down, he's been dying to drive your GTO. He's always wanted one."

A look of surprise flooded Stephanie's face. "*Really?*"

Mitch grinned. "Maybe we could go for a ride tonight."

"That's why I had to break up that cute love scene. We don't want to keep your grandpa waiting, and I've been dying to finally try that junkyard dog stew."

Mitch backed from the drive and pulled away. When he neared the end of the street, he checked the rearview mirror. The house appeared dismal and hollow. He wouldn't miss the place, nor the gunfire at night, nor the gang-bangers smoking their weed and flashing their signs. Even now it seemed like a whole other world, a hard past that held a multitude of memories.

The thought of Stephanie having her parents back didn't seem real, either. And living in their home for a while was an even wilder thought. "You'll let us pay rent, won't you?" he pestered for a third time.

"Don't be silly," Levina smiled. "You're doing us a favor. It's been a nightmare trying to keep up with two places. Whenever we come home it seems like all we do is sort through junk mail, throw away the newspapers, and buy a few groceries before heading back to D.C. And we do have an ulterior motive," she added, a gleam in her eye. "You'll be hosting us for dinner once a week. That'll be your rent." She turned to Mitch and gave him a little poke on the shoulder. "It'll take a brave man to have his in-laws staying in his home so often."

Mitch laughed aloud. "After the couple of weeks we've had, it'll be a treat."

EPILOGUE

STEPHANIE LAY RESTING in her hospital bed. After thirteen long hours of labor, enough pain to make Mitch begin to wonder if it was all worth it, several bouts with despair and short tempers, and the amazing epidural that had made the last hour the most incredible experience of the young couple's lives, the work was done. Two tiny, perfect newborns, their bodies a bit swollen from their prolonged and dramatic curtain-call, lay at their mother's breast.

Darcy was born first, with lots of curly, strawberry-blonde hair and long legs like her mother's. Drake, the bigger of the two, was a little less willing to come into the world. Breech, he'd refused to be turned. (Stephanie later joked that he'd acquired his dad's stubborn streak.) After a touch-and-go delivery, he made his arrival. Poor Mitch had worried that the doctor was going to pull the little guy's legs off as he tugged him free. His blonde hair also had a touch of red.

Mitch was a bit protective at first, insisting that Stephanie get some rest before the onslaught of well-wishing friends. While she slept, he helped bathe, weigh and cuddle his babies. He decided to wait a few hours to make the calls to announce their good fortune.

The first call he placed was to Grandma and Grandpa MacArthur. Levina, only a little put out that she hadn't been notified Stephanie had finally gone into labor—after three false starts—was delighted at the news. Fortunately the wee ones had arrived on a weekend, when they were in town, and they came right over.

Grandpa Wilson was the first to arrive at the hospital, Smitty right on his tail. With two months' growth of hair on the mute's head, the zigzag scar was hardly noticeable. He still struggled with his newfound voice, but managed a timid "Hello." The color in Grandpa's face was back to its normal purplish shade. His bluster had returned to full color as well, now ornery as ever. "Land sakes, you two. You kept this old man waitin' too long," he chided. "Wouldn't you know it, she delivered a week late."

He bent over and gave Stephanie a gentle hug. She chastised him for the little love pat and made him come back for a real hug, the kind that lights up a room. Then he turned to the door, wringing his hands impatiently. "Now, where are them little tykes?" he grouched. Mitch explained that the pink lady had gone to get them and she would be there soon.

Grandma and Grandpa MacArthur were next to appear. The congressman actually met Mitch with a congratulatory embrace and a grin as big as Nevada. After all was said and done, it was the 'boy from the junkyard' who'd given him something more important than all the votes in Nevada: his first grandchildren.

The excitement waned slightly the moment Cap'n entered the room, along with Reverend Keller. The big black man still wore a small yellow ribbon on each strap of his worn coveralls, in honor of Sound. But today, he announced, was the day to take them off. He'd promised himself that when the newborns arrived he, like them, would begin anew. It was time to leave the sad memories behind and fill his days with good ones.

The 14-by-12-foot private room nearly burst at the seams when Greg stopped by with his wife and two children. The sight sent chill bumps up Reverend Keller's body. The former wreck's face now registered the smile of a blackjack winner—without all the excess baggage. The nurses at the desk debated as to whether or not they should limit the number of visitors, but seeing the joy brought by and taken away by the guests, they promptly shelved the matter.

The room hummed with congratulations, introductions, handshakes and hugs. It was Smitty who first spied the little cart coming down the hallway. As if he'd planned the climactic occasion, he paraded into the room, clapped his hands together, and waited for the cart to near the door. Then he announced, in broken English, "Presenting Drake and Darcy Wilson!"

The room erupted with excitement and wild applause. Drake immediately scrunched his wrinkled face began to cry at the ruckus. The old woman pushing the cart bent down, gently hefted the infant into her arms, and clucked her tongue to pacify the startled little child. A hush fell over the packed room as she leveled her crooked finger at the crowd and said in a whisper, her chronic southern drawl firmly in place, "If'n you're gonna make my babies cry, I'll get a stick and chase ever' one a' ya' out a' here. Their mama gots t' feed 'em, anyways." Mrs. Lambert appeared chic in her satiny pink jacket. Oh, how she loved the work—

especially on a day such as this day. She handed the baby to Stephanie and went to fetch Darcy. Cap'n, tears of joy streaming down his face, took in a deep breath and reached down to remove the pins that held the faded ribbons on his straps. Reverend Keller stretched out his hand and took the battle-scarred strips of cloth, tucking them into his pocket, a silent prayer of thanks on his lips.

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